



AAC Publications

Spearhead, The Kingfisher

United States, Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park

I originally spotted the line on Spearhead that would become The Kingfisher over 20 years ago—my eye was drawn to a beautiful arête formed by the left edge of the eponymous flake on The Barb (9 pitches, III 5.10). I tried to suss out a possible free line about six years ago, but was left dangling in space due to the lack of gear for directionals at the top of the Barb Flake.

I didn't return until July 2021, with Paul Heyliger. I had a new strategy and new urgency. I underwent hip replacement surgery a few years ago, and my shoulder is also in need of a full joint replacement, so I knew I might only have one or two summers left to try such an ambitious project. With two ropes and some fancy rigging, I was able to top-rope the arête this time. The climbing was excellent and the position spectacular. Now I just had to figure out the lower pitches.

In August and September 2021, I spent another six days swinging around on rappel, placing protection and anchor bolts, and cleaning the line. In all of this, I had help from Paul, Audrey Oberlin, Adam Sanders, and Laura Schmonsees.

With the hard work done, it was time to climb. Laura hiked six miles into Glacier Gorge on the night of September 16 to bivouac with me below Spearhead. The next morning we climbed the first two easy pitches of Sykes' Sickle (900', 7 pitches, III 5.9+), then traversed right along Middle Earth, a large, grassy ledge about 200' up the wall. This brought us to the five new pitches I'd prepped, the first of which is a 5.9 up left-facing flakes to knobs through a roof. I sent it without difficulty—a good confidence boost. The next pitch, which I named "The LA Times," was much more sustained and difficult. The awesome, thin, diagonaling 5.10+ seam took me a long time, but I made it to the chains without falling. Following this, on the bolted 5.11b "Sea of Doubt" pitch, I felt shaky and nervous; I fell several times trying to get to the second bolt. I lowered to the belay and after resting for 20 minutes fired the knob- and scoop-covered slab cleanly.

The wall was now in full shade and temps were dropping. I started off on the 5.10b "Halcyon Crack" and made it through the thin-fingers crux and then to the belay below the final pitch: the beautiful 5.11a "Kingfisher Arête." I climbed with confidence through the lower crux and onto the airy edge of the flake. Massive exposure! I nearly fell at the last bolt, but somehow managed to hang on for the redpoint. Laura and I rapped the route from the summit of the Barb Flake and hiked out that night. (It is also possible to downclimb off the back side of the flake at exciting 5.10a, and then continue to Spearhead's summit via the North Ridge.)

We had done it! But the story wasn't over.

I returned in June 2022 with Adam Sanders and equipped a two-pitch direct start I had noticed near the end of the prior season. On July 10, Adam and I freed the entire route with this new intro, swapping leads. The first pitch proved to be harder than anything above, with several sections of thin 5.11 face climbing. The second pitch, in the 5.10+ to 5.11- range, tackles some easy bulges and culminates with a difficult sequence over a roof. When we bolted the first pitch, a snowfield reached quite high up the wall. By late July and August, climbers were reporting that our first bolt was 16' to 20' above the talus and quite dangerous to reach, so we went back one last time and placed a lower bolt to make the "late season" start safer.

I have climbed the Spearhead over 50 times now, via many different routes. I think The Kingfisher (7 pitches, 700', IV 5.11c PG-13) ranks among the best. Most belays are at comfortable ledges or stances, the line is sustained, and the rock is incredible.

My trips to Spearhead are infrequent now as I look toward more surgeries and bigger limitations. But The Kingfisher seems the perfect way to wind down my alpine climbing career. I'll always be able to look back on these halcyon days with a feeling of pride and fondness.

– **Jeff Giddings**

Images



Jake Baldwin following the “LA Times” pitch on The Kingfisher (700', 7 pitches, IV 5.11b), Spearhead, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.



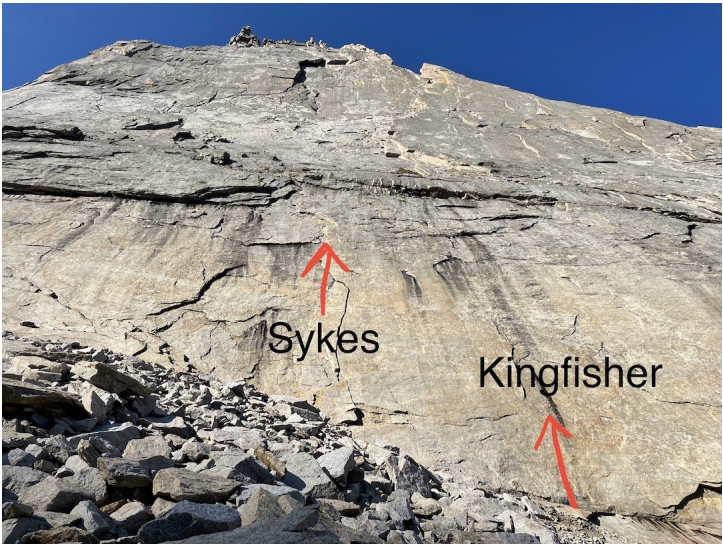
Jake Baldwin leading the “Halcyon Crack” (5.10b) on The Kingfisher.



Jake Baldwin leading the "Kingfisher Arete" (5.11a) of The Kingfisher (700', 7 pitches, IV 5.11b), Spearhead, Rocky Mountain National Park.



Jeff Giddings leading the "Halcyon Crack" (5.10b) during the first free ascent of The Kingfisher.



The starts of Syke's Sickle and The Kingfisher on Spearhead, Rocky Mountain National Park.



The "kingfisher" profile, in black, left of the first pitch of The Kingfisher route.

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