



AAC Publications

Mystery Dome, South Face, Liminal Line

United States, Idaho, Bitterroot Mountains

Located 20 miles from the trailhead, itself at the dead end of a 40-mile mountain road, Mystery Dome resides in a glaciated canyon that is home to old-growth forests, the howls and tracks of wolves, and the incessant rumble of Whitecap Creek. It's stunning.

In 2020, with the help of several partners, I completed Bitter Fruit (10 pitches, 5.11) on the west face, which was also the first free ascent of the dome. [The first technical route on Mystery Dome was the southwest arete (13 pitches, V 5.10 A3), put up in 2012; see AAJ 2014.] My thoughts often returned over the next two years to a possible line on the south face, where a singular crack splits a clean headwall, with moderate terrain higher up. In my head, the line lived in a liminal space between impossible and just maybe.

In summer 2022, I decided it was finally time to return to Mystery Dome. A few seasons on Yosemite granite had given me the confidence to try the south face. I applied for and received a Live Your Dream Grant from the AAC and recruited my good friends Greg Rickenbacker and Erika Smith. We began the two-day approach from Paradise Campground on June 27, weighed down with 80-pound packs.

On June 29, we began climbing. A moderate first pitch ended at a good ledge, from which I led the first half of a dangerously loose pitch at 5.10 R. I lowered down and Greg took over for the second half on a two-hour A3 lead to reach the base of the headwall splitter. It turned out to be a beautiful A2 groove, which Greg also led. We named it the "A2 Beauty." From the top of pitch three, we fixed lines and returned to the ground for the night.

We woke early on June 30 and juggled back to our high point. I resumed leading and followed the crack as it dog-legged right before shooting up again into a right-facing corner capped by a roof. At the roof, tenuous stemming out and left led to a good belay ledge. At 5.11b, this was the free climbing crux. After three pitches of run-out slabs and lieback flakes, we passed an alcove that would be a fantastic bivy—we dubbed it the Captain's Quarters—and continued with two more moderate pitches to the summit of Mystery Dome, where we added our names to the summit register and savored the view from the top. We descended via a gully to the west and hiked out the following day.

The Liminal Line (V 5.11b A3) covers 1,650' of climbing over nine pitches. I freed the A2 splitter on top-rope, using a Mini Traxion, at 5.12-. The A3 pitch could go free in the 5.12+/5.13- range, but extensive cleaning and preplaced beaks probably would be needed.

— Benj Wollant

Images



(Left to right) Benj Wollant, Erika Smith, and Greg Rickenbacker on their way to Mystery Dome.



The Liminal Line (1,650' of climbing, V 5.11b A3), on the south face of Mystery Dome, Bitterroot Mountains, Idaho.



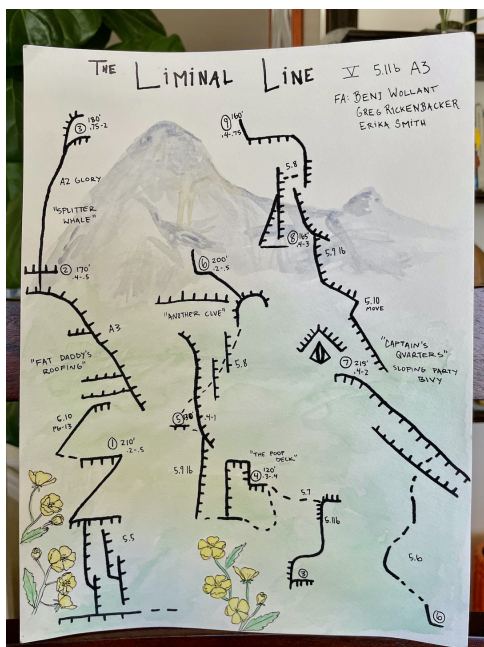
The "A2 Beauty" pitch at sunrise on the south face of Mystery Dome.



Greg Rickenbacker leading pitch three, the "A2 Beauty," during the first ascent of the Liminal Line face (1,650' of climbing, V 5.11b A3), on the south face of Mystery Dome, Bitterroot Mountains, Idaho.



Erika Smith on the final slab traverse moves on pitch four of the Liminal Line (1,650' of climbing, V 5.11b A3), on the south face of Mystery Dome, Bitterroot Mountains, Idaho.



The topo for the Liminal Line (1,650' of climbing, V 5.11b A3), on the south face of Mystery Dome, Bitterroot Mountains, Idaho.

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