



AAC Publications

The HURT: Honnold's Ultimate Red Rock Traverse

Nevada, Red Rock National Conservation Area

View to the north over Red Rock. The peaks' vertical relief averages around 2,000 feet. The HURT started with (A) White Rock Peak and crossed (B) Bridge Point, (C) Mt. Wilson, (D) Black Velvet Peak, and nearly 20 other summits before finishing at Mountain Springs, off-picture in lower left. Photo by Marli Miller.

I've lived in Las Vegas for six years, and climbed here for maybe 10 winters before that. I've had numerous epic adventures in Red Rock, getting lost on descents. Or even on the approaches! Red Rock is a deceptively complicated landscape. It can be a veritable maze of folded sandstone, requiring careful route-finding and nonstop climbing, scrambling, and rock hopping to navigate in and out of the canyons. A few years ago, it occurred to me that a technical traverse of the entire range was possible. Many different climbing link-ups have been done in Red Rock over the years, and ultra-runners often summit several of the mountains in a day using the less-steep limestone escarpments behind the soaring sandstone walls. But no one had yet combined the two pursuits and taken them to their logical conclusion: rock climbing along the entire Keystone Thrust of the Spring Mountains in one big outing.

To see if it might be possible, I spent several months soloing classic lines—routes like Crimson Chrysalis and Tunnel Vision—and slowly pieced together ways to the tops of their respective peaks. Many routes end 1,000' or more below the true summits, and the remaining terrain frequently contains engaging climbing and scrambling.

In the spring of 2021, my first season of effort on the traverse ended after two small mishaps. First, I broke a hold while scrambling up to the south summit of Mt. Wilson and tumbled down a gully. I avoided serious injury but sprained both wrists. The experience seriously shook my confidence in the area's rock quality. Then I had an experience free soloing the route Inti Watana (2,000', IV 5.10c), also on Mt. Wilson, in which I felt like I was getting heatstroke on the sunny approach but then numbed out in the cold on the shaded crux crimps. The temperature contrasts were getting too extreme; I'd waited too long in the season, and it was now getting too hot in the sun but staying too chilly in the shade. For a traverse that I guessed would take anywhere from 24 to 36 hours, I needed more consistent conditions.

For a while, I kept the traverse on the back burner. My wife, Sanni McCandless, and I had a daughter in early 2022, and I didn't want to spend too much time away from the house. Finally, in the fall, I felt ready to revisit the traverse in earnest, despite the serious September heat and increasingly shorter days.

I kept making small improvements to my route until the very end. On one of my last outings, I realized I could add an excursion to the top of Hidden Peak, which offered both an extra summit and a more civilized descent into Black Velvet Canyon—where I needed to wind up at some point to climb the classic Epinephrine (16 pitches, 5.9). After much adjustment, I had devised a route that combined all of the summits you see from the highway and many of the famous climbing routes, all while maintaining a relatively straight, uncontrived line.

I waited until October 10, banking on the full moon to help with the route-finding. (In the end, it was cloudy, so the moon was little help.) My strategy was to keep a nice, even pace for as long as it took, to keep my heart rate from getting too high in an effort to avoid muscular fatigue. I also would rely on the support of friends and family to keep me fed and watered, so that I could carry as little as

possible. For longer segments, where I needed a pack to carry enough water, I'd use a running vest; when I needed less, I'd use a fanny pack. I also planned to climb several of the routes with no chalk bag, to save the hassle of carrying it for long distances between routes; to climb as many routes as possible in my approach shoes, to save my feet; and to use running gaiters to cover my approach shoes—there was a ton of off-trail terrain, and the gaiters prevented my shoes from filling with sand and gravel. In general, I planned to employ a lot of ultra-running tricks.

I began around 6:15 a.m. from the White Rock trailhead, jogging to Tunnel Vision (6 pitches, 5.7), which I soloed on my way to the summit of White Rock Peak (which has various names on different maps). I was on the summit after an hour or so, and back down to the Lost Creek parking area about 45 minutes after that. Friend and local ultra-runner Chris Gorney met me there with a bagel and more water, and to pace me on the next section. We spent roughly two hours scrambling up to the summit of North Peak—at ~7,200', the highest point on the traverse—via a few minor summits along the ridge: Goodman (6,414'), Duderino, the Buffalo Wall, and North Sandstone Peak. It took us another hour to bushwhack straight down to the notch between North Peak and Bridge Mountain (6,955'), where we took the normal third-class scrambling route to the latter's summit. I then downclimbed the Northeast Ridge of Bridge (5 pitches, 5.6), while Chris jogged around to avoid the technical climbing, and we both tagged the nearby summit of Bridge Point before descending Fern Canyon into the north fork of Pine Creek.

My friend Maury Birdwell met us at the base of Dark Shadows (10 pitches, 5.8) with more food and water. I soloed the route in 40 minutes, navigating past a half dozen parties or so, to reach the summit of Mescalito (5,440+') around 1 p.m. I'd been on the move for almost nearly 7 hours. At this point, there were loud claps of thunder, but I decided to hope for the best. Thankfully, it never rained on me, and the clouds and wind were a welcome reprieve from the midday heat.

Next, I downclimbed Cat in the Hat (7 pitches, 5.6) into the south fork of Pine Creek, before heading up Community Pilar (6 pitches, 5.8+) to the summit of Magic Mountain (5,360+'). From there, I traversed over to the summit of the Rose Tower (5,220'), in order to downclimb Olive Oil (5 pitches, 5.7), which put me at the base of Aquarium (8 pitches, 5.9). I used Aquarium to access Armatron (5 pitches, 5.9) and the summit of Juniper Peak (6,109'). I then hiked down the normal descent and downclimbed Myster Z (5 pitches, 5.7) to reach the bottom of Juniper Canyon, before hiking up to the base of Crimson Chrysalis (11 pitches, 5.8+); I climbed that, along with some extra pitches above the tower, to reach the rim of the canyon.

It got dark as I climbed Crimson. I was starting to feel quite fatigued. From the top, I traversed over to the base of the Rainbow Wall, where I climbed the Bird Hunter Buttress (12 pitches, 5.9) to the summit of Rainbow Mountain (6,820'). I continued over to the east summit of Rainbow, about a 30-minute scramble, and then downclimbed Solar Slab (9 pitches, 5.6) into Oak Creek Canyon.

Sanni and Maury met me at the mouth of Oak Creek around midnight on October 11, about 18 hours in. I was deep into the night shift and starting to move much slower, but the next route was the crux. After a quick picnic with my friends, I staggered up to the base of Inti Watana and dragged myself up the 21-pitch route over the course of two hours. At solid 5.10, Inti had the hardest climbing on the whole traverse—hard enough that I'd climbed the route with a partner the week before to tick some holds and memorize some beta.

Chris Gorney joined me again on the south summit of Mt. Wilson (7,070') in the middle of the night. He was a welcome sight, pacing me and helping me find the way down the third- and fourth-class descent. When we reached First Creek at the base of Mt. Wilson, I decided to skip the next route that I had planned to climb; the margins were starting to feel a little too thin. Instead of soloing Celtic Cracks, another 1,500-foot 5.10+, we took a fourth-class scrambling route to the summit of Indecision Peak (6,420'). It seemed safer and infinitely more comfortable than putting on my climbing shoes again.

From the summit, Chris and I followed the limestone escarpment all the way to Hidden Peak (6,300'). The sun rose somewhere along the way, dramatically boosting my morale. We were tired, but it still took us less than an hour to descend into the bottom of Black Velvet Canyon to the start of Epinephrine (16 pitches, 5.9).

Maury, Sanni, and several other friends met us at the base of Epi with another picnic spread. At this point, I considered just going home; I'd already compromised on my original vision by skipping a route. I was 30-plus hours in and, frankly, didn't want to climb any more. But after much conversation with my friends, Maury and I decided to solo Epinephrine together and then hike the rest of the way south to the highway along the limestone escarpment above Whiskey Peak (5,180'). I climbed the route in my approach shoes because climbing shoes were out of the question—my feet were killing me. It took us two hours to the summit (slightly off my 34-minute record pace) and then another 1.5 hours to hike south to Mountain Springs on Highway 160, the southern terminus of the Red Rock range, where we arrived a bit after 2 p.m.

All told, the traverse took 32 hours and 6 minutes (with about 2.25 hours of rests and transitions). I covered about 35 miles, logged 24,000' of gain, and summited 18 to 23 peaks, depending on what you define as a summit. The 14 classic routes I did added up to 126 pitches and approximately 13,000' of technical climbing.

The HURT—Honnold's Ultimate Red Rock Traverse—wound up being slightly smaller than what I had dreamed up, but felt like a reasonable compromise in favor of safety. It certainly packs a whole lot of the quintessential Red Rock experience into a single outing.

— Alex Honnold

TIME CHECKS

6:15 a.m. Start from White Rock trailhead

7:18 a.m. Summit of White Rock peak via Tunnel Vision (5.7, "pioneered cool variation above the top of the route")

8:01 a.m. Lost Creek parking

9:57 a.m. Summit of North Peak (7,200') via Goodman, Duderino, Buffalo Wall, and North Sandstone

10:47 a.m. Summit of Bridge (6,950') via direct, bushwhacky descent off North Peak

11:26 a.m. Summit of Bridge Point. Downclimbed Northeast Ridge of Bridge (5.6) and traversed over.

12:20 p.m. Base of Mescalito. "So many parties on the bottom. Crazy! And thunderstorms looming!"

1:01 p.m. Summit of Mescalito via Dark Shadows (5.8). Descent off Mescalito via Cat in the Hat (5.6), then up and over Magic Mountain and Rose tower via Community Pilar (5.8) and Olive Oil (5.7). ("This split is confusing—I forgot to lap somewhere along the way, I suppose.")

3:22 p.m. Summit of Juniper Peak via Aquarium (5.9) and Armatron (5.9).

4:13 p.m. Base of Myster Z (5.7) after descent from Juniper Peak

4:50 p.m. Base of Crimson Chrysalis

8:24 p.m. Top of Rainbow Mountain via Crimson Chrysalis (5.8+++) and Bird Hunter Buttress (5.9), with long descent in between

8:45 p.m. Summit of Rainbow East

10:08 p.m. Base of Solar Slab ("slow and low performance in the dark.... started to struggle a bit...")

11:41 p.m. Base of Inti Watana ("Met Sanni and Maury at Knoll trail junction and had some snacks. First real rest. Then hiked together to horse camp, then continued alone up to Inti Watana.

1:43 a.m. Summit of Mt. Wilson via Inti Watana (5.10c, "Climbing felt hard")

2:04 a.m. South Summit of Mt. Wilson

3:26 a.m. Back down in First Creek Canyon after tricky 3rd-class direct descent. Tagged White Pinnacle along the way down.

5:35 a.m. Top of Indecision Peak via scrambling route up the front ("decided not to climb the Celtic Cracks because they seemed too sketchy in my fatigued state, and they aren't any fun in even the best of conditions")

8:01 a.m. Top of Hidden Peak

8:57 a.m. Base of Epinephrine in Black Velvet Canyon

10:24 a.m. "Started up Epi after a long rest, eating, drinking, and hanging out with Sanni and the Sender film crew. Tried to decide if I should bail or not..."

12:36 p.m. Summit of Black Velvet Peak via Epinephrine (5.9, "Climbed in approach shoes because my feet hurt so much. Maury paced me and filmed a bit."

2:08 p.m. Highway at Mountain Springs

NAMED ROUTES CLIMBED OR DOWNCLIMBED

1. Tunnel Vision (6 pitches, 5.7)
2. NE Are te, Bridge Mtn. (5 pitches, 5.6)
3. Dark Shadows (10 pitches, 5.8)
4. Cat in the Hat (7 pitches, 5.6)
5. Community Pillar (6 pitches, 5.8+)
6. Olive Oyl (5 pitches, 5.7)
7. Aquarium (8 pitches, 5.9)
8. Armatron (5 pitches, 5.9)
9. Myster Z (5 pitches, 5.7)
10. Crimson Chrysalis (11 pitches, 5.8+)
11. Bird Hunter Buttress (12 pitches, 5.9)
12. Solar Slab (9 pitches, 5.6)
13. Inti Watana (21 pitches, 5.10c)
14. Epinephrine (16 pitches, 5.9)

LIST OF SUMMITS

White Rock Peak
Goodman Peak
Duderino*
Buffalo Wall*
Sandstone North
North Peak
Bridge
Bridge Point
Mescalito
Magic Mountain
Rose Tower
Jackrabbit Buttress*
Juniper Peak
Cloud Tower*
Bench below the Rainbow Wall*
Rainbow Wall
Rainbow East
Mt. Wilson
South Summit Mt Wilson
White Pinnacle
Indecision Peak
Hidden Peak
Black Velvet Peak

*Indicates an unofficial summit

Images



Alex Honnold on White Rock Peak, soon after starting the HURT.



Alex Honnold stares up at Mt. Wilson in the middle of the night while completing the HURT.



View to the north over Red Rock. The peaks' vertical relief averages around 2,000 feet. The HURT started with (A) White Rock Peak and crossed (B) Bridge Point, (C) Mt. Wilson, (D) Black Velvet Peak, and nearly 20 other summits before finishing at Mountain Springs, off-picture in lower left.

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