



AAC Publications

Mt. Alice, East Face, The Mad Hatter

Colorado, Rocky Mountains, Rocky Mountain National Park

"It'll be, like, 5.10 for you guys! You'll be able to pull it off in a weekend trip, and, man, it'll be great climbing. Totally worthwhile!"

These were the words of encouragement from Estes Park legend Harry Kent when I first approached him about free climbing his 1976 route Good Vibrations (V 5.9 A3) on the east face of Mt. Alice (13,310'), deep in the Wild Basin backcountry of Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP). Harry is the founder of Kent Mountain Adventure Center (KMAC), whose team of misfit guides have been my closest friends since I moved to Estes in 2019. And so, in late August 2021, I wrangled KMAC homies August Franzen and Gus Anderson for the nine-mile slog into the Mt. Alice cirque.

We shouldered heavy loads, and by the time Alice came into view, our spirits—if not our legs and backs—were broken. We bivouacked nearly two miles from the wall, and in the morning, with low overall morale, we shifted gears and spent the weekend climbing aesthetic boulders and possible single-pitch FAs around Trio Falls.

One week later, armed with a better understanding of the approach, I recruited Josh "Sender" Bender to head back. For years, Josh has been my most reliable and persistent climbing partner—and undoubtedly the most proficient crack climber I've shared a rope with. We found our way through the expansive talus fields below Alice's east face to a closer, more suitable bivy, and the next day, Josh cast off early in the morning on what we believed to be the first pitch of Good Vibrations. Harry had been unable to offer any useful beta, and the modern guidebook had only a vague description.

Josh soon found himself in a dirty corner about 100' off the ground, with only one piece of gear, 50' below him. I'll never forget the sight of his body falling toward me when he pulled off a chunk of granite, before miraculously stopping himself with an improbable spread-eagle stem move after a 10' fall! We eventually bailed from pitch two, which was essentially a house of cards of thin death blocks. Good Vibrations, we realized, was not the quick and easy "5.10" weekend route Harry Kent had promised.

Still intrigued by Alice, we kicked off the next summer season, 2022, with a recon mission. It became obvious that Keith Lober and Joe Hladick's 1979 route Jabberwocky, which climbed obvious features some 300' left of Good Vibrations, would make for a much higher-quality free climbing outing. From miles away, a viewer at Lion Lakes could appreciate the enormous orange dihedral in the wall's dead center (pitch five) or the immaculate shield of granite with its arching crack one pitch below. We hoped to link these features through the proudest part of the wall to access the Lober line's A3 crux.

Josh and I took a weekend-warrior approach and devoted every free moment we could to this project. We had our schedule mapped out: hike into the cirque on Fridays after work, spend the weekend climbing, and stumble out Sunday night before the workweek. Thankfully, as a business owner, I had nobody to report to when my productivity crashed every Monday afternoon. It's a true marvel that Josh managed to return to his job as an arborist week after week without injury.

We spent nearly every weekend of July slowly pushing our way up the wall. We averaged less than one pitch per day and had to bail in terrifying electrical storms nearly every time. After most of the

season, we had pieced together an independent four-pitch start to access the steep crux pitches of Jabberwocky, which we would follow to the top. Progress was gruelingly slow, but by the end of 2022, we had established our line to within 100' of the summit.

Our goal was always to produce a high-quality free climb that would be fun to repeat and to expand the climbing resource in RMNP. After much deliberation, we decided to install two-bolt anchors at each belay and to place a few necessary protection bolts (two on the pitch three slab, and one at the flared crux of pitch four), rather than leave unsightly tat that would soon weather and become dangerous.

As the season came to a close, we made one ground-up free attempt—and both walked away with bloody hands and bruised egos from the hard ring locks of the pitch six crux. We knew we both needed to level up, and we went to work honing our skills with trips to Indian Creek and a winter of strength training.

A few more rainy trips during July 2023 allowed us to finish work on the route, and on August 23 everything aligned for a free attempt, with the talented photographer Julia Cassou along to document. We both approached the climb that day with a mix of confidence and uncertainty. The possibility of one of us sending and the other failing was horrifying—we had both invested so much.

We made quick work of the bottom half, dispatching the route's progressively harder crack and slab pitches up to 5.12- before arriving at pitch six around 10 a.m. The warm sun lit up the wall as we taped in preparation for the burly ring locks. The pitch starts with a boulder problem through a hanging dagger we'd named the Wild Fang, then tests every skill in the climber's toolbox, including ring locks, offwidth, tricky aspect changes, roofs, hard laybacking, and technical face climbing. Though we both had rehearsed the crux, I still had never sent the boulder problem off the belay or the changing-corners crux 900' feet off the deck (and at 12,500'), near the end of the rope length.

It was my lead, and Josh had Tupac's "Ambitionz az a Ridah" bumping from his phone as I left the belay. The music faded and I moved fluidly. Before I knew what was happening, I had sent the crux of our multi-year project and was lowering off to support my friend. When Josh, too, clipped the chains, our cheering echoed throughout the cirque. Although we had one more challenging pitch above—a burly 5.11—we knew we had succeeded.

One hour later, we had a rushed celebration on the summit before the typical noon shitstorm had us sprint-rappelling. When the rain let up, we were greeted with a triple rainbow in the foreground between us and Longs Peak.

The process of establishing The Mad Hatter (8 pitches, 5.12) was demanding of time, energy, and resources. I am eternally grateful to Josh for being the best partner for this mission, the AAC for hooking us up with a Live Your Dream Grant, and to my wife, Meg Yingling, for all her patience and support throughout.

— Rob Scrivner

The Mad Hatter: Route Description

Approach Ramp: Scramble in from the far right along the ledge system. Some parties may choose to rope up before tackling an exposed bulge and low-fifth-class slab. About 200' before the top of the ramp, look for a small cave and inobvious pillar that marks the beginning of P1.

Pitch 1: 5.10- From the ramp turn around and climb onto the inobvious pillar. Move through poor rock

to access the roof and V-notch. Turn the roof and continue through spooky flakes to a comfortable ledge and two-bolt anchor. (85')

Pitch 2: 5.11+ Climb into the overhang and make several bouldery moves protected by the .1/.2 offset cam. Get a nice rest before pulling into more steep fingers followed by thin, technical climbing and tricky gear. Enjoy great movement into a wider section before finishing the pitch with more steep 5.10 climbing and a two-bolt anchor. (180')

Pitch 3: 5.10+ Follow ledgy, low-angle rock up and right to the left side of a slab. Small gear leads to the first bolt on the slab. Climb the beautiful slab up and right to gain a finger crack then hands splitter. Hard moves around some vegetation lead to a roof. Climb through the roof and follow the low-angle corner to a two-bolt anchor up and left. (180')

Pitch 4: 5.12- Straightforward climbing with tricky gear leads to a .12- arching roof with one bolt. Bouldery movement leads straight up to a ledge. Move right to a two-bolt anchor and good ledge beneath the giant orange dihedral. This pitch climbs through the beautiful shield of rock visible from the ground. (120')

Pitch 5: 5.10 PG-13 Climb the low-angle splitter until it steepens to a nice big-hands crack in the giant, obvious orange dihedral. Do not continue to the top of this crack; rather make an airy traverse left through large flakes (5.10 PG-13) toward a two-bolt anchor and a stance right of the Wild Fang. (130')

Pitch 6: 5.12b/c Start with a boulder problem through the Wild Fang. Gain the splitter that leads to the arête and an airy mantel around the corner. Climb through wide flakes to a good stance before making another aspect change to access a finger crack, which leads to the roof. Pull through the roof to hard laybacking before making sporty moves right to a two-bolt anchor. (100')

Pitch 7: 5.11 Continue up the right-facing dihedral. Hard tips/fingers laybacking off the anchor leads to thin hands and a fun roof. Turn the small roof into a wide flare followed by a strenuous section of fists/offwidth. Pass another roof on its right side before a short rest at the bottom of the black band. Solve the puzzle of moving right through the black band (PG-13/R) before continuing up an easy right-facing corner to a good ledge and a two-bolt anchor. (150')

Pitch 8: 5.9 Climb the massive left-facing dihedral to a large ledge near the summit plateau; two-bolt anchor. (100')

Descent: Walk off via the Southeast Gully, Hourglass Ridge, or rap the route. Pitch 8 can be rappelled with a single 60m rope. Bypass pitches 6 and 7 with a direct rappel straight below the pitch 7 anchor (see topo) using double ropes. From the pitch 4 anchor, follow the route down. It is possible to rappel from the top of the pitch one anchor to the far right-side of the approach ramp, past the exposed bulge, with double 60m ropes

Images



Josh Bender on the burly laybacking of pitch four's arching crack on The Mad Hatter.



Rob Scrivner halfway through the sixth pitch of The Mad Hatter, below the crux roof.



Josh Bender above the roof on pitch six of The Mad Hatter.



The Mad Hatter (8 pitches, 5.12) on the east face of Mt. Alice (13,310') in the Wild Basin area of Rocky Mountain National Park. The new route is a free version of Jabberwocky (Hladick-Lober, 1979). Other routes on the face not shown.



Thanks, AAC!

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