



AAC Publications

Litner Group, Many First Ascents

Idaho, Salmon River Mountains, Bighorn Crags

Panoramic view of the crags above both sides of Ship Island Creek, which drains Ship Island Lake at left and flows down to the Middle Fork Salmon River. Photo by Cody Goldberg

For decades, Idaho climbers have imagined what it would be like to climb in the area of the Bighorn Crags surrounding Ship Island Creek, which flows steeply out of Ship Island Lake. The climbs, tantalizingly hard to reach, would reach summits that didn't have names, had never been touched by climbers (unless the Sheepeater/Shoshone peoples liked steep rock climbing), and might be made of solid Idaho Batholith granite (but more likely Idaho choss).

In his excellent *Idaho: A Climbing Guide*, Tom Lopez writes enticingly of the area: "Of interest to rock climbers is a tangled collection of spires, faces, and cliffs at the west end of Ship Island Lake called the Litner Group. Because it is more than 10 miles from the nearest trailhead, little climbing activity has taken place in the Litner Group but, rest assured, the area has high potential for serious rock climbers." The only prior climbing our group could unearth was detailed in a 1955 report by Lincoln Hales in the *Seattle Mountaineers'* annual journal. Hales and Pete Schoening made the first ascent of the "main peak"—presumably the Litner Peak that Tom mentions in his guidebook.

Intrigued, Max Bechdel, Ian Cavanaugh, Cody Goldberg, Brady Johnston, Carolyn Pace, and I made the long trek into the Litner Group in late August 2020, with pack string support, to see what we would find.

From the trailhead—itself three hours from the small town of Challis—we hiked 12 miles and crossed two passes through the Frank Church Wilderness to reach Ship Island Lake. We then bushwhacked another 1.5 miles to the west end of the lake and made camp.

On our first climbing day, we aimed for the obvious face on a twin-spired formation we named the Rabbit Ears, right above camp. (Unless noted, all formations described here were named by us.) This feature is about halfway up what the 1955 party may have called Litner Peak, the highest point in the canyon. Brady and I made the first ascent of Pace Setter (850', 7 pitches, III 5.9), while 30 meters to our left, Max and Ian opened the Jeff Halligan Memorial Route (850', 7 pitches, III 5.10), in honor of our horse-packing guide, who was also the CEO of the Idaho Trails Association. Both were exceptionally high quality and promised more good things to come.

That same day, Cody and Carolyn established Launch Over It (700', 5 pitches, III 5.10+), on a formation we called the BFR (Big Fancy? Rocket) after Elon Musk's Mars ambitions. The BFR lies halfway up the magnificent Mission to Mars massif, just northwest of the Rabbit Ears.

A rainy day allowed us to explore down the canyon as far as the first significant saddle into the drainage north of Ship Island Creek. Jaw-dropping views south across the canyon to the Biggie Smalls Wall (dead vertical, 300 meters) made all of us realize just how extensive the climbing here could be. A dozen or so major summits line both sides of the valley, each with numerous route possibilities. But looks are deceiving: The splitter hand jam in the spotting scope, we learned, often turned out to be a splitter offwidth, the offwidth turned out to be a chimney, and so on.

After a cold night that brought snow above camp, Brady, Ian, and Max traversed the lake outlet slabs

to explore a complex tower at the northwest end of the already-named Wolf's Fang Ridge. As a name for the tower, I favored Barad Dur, Sauron's fortress in *The Lord of the Rings*. Alas, I was the only LOTR fan in the group, and they favored calling it Lighthouse Tower, sticking to a nautical theme. They completed the first climb to the top: Idahome (925', 5 pitches, IV 5.11a). Meanwhile, Cody and Carolyn established Geoffrey Chosser (650', 5 pitches, IV 5.10+) on the Bookshelf, a soaring formation with half a dozen or so summits. Over the next two days, the group put up three more climbs on this face. The first two—Mermaid's Tail (3 pitches, III 5.11b) and a direct variation called Siren's Song (III 5.12)—were highlights of the trip, even though they ended midway up the mountain.

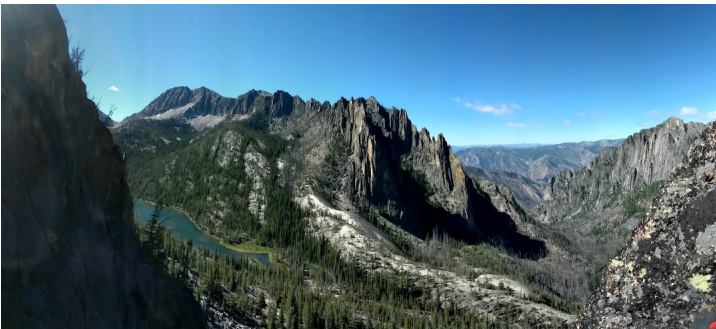
Everywhere we looked, more climbing beckoned. But all great trips come to an end. In all, on a seven-day trip with just four climbing days, our group climbed six Grade III and two Grade IV routes—with a couple of other shorter routes—totaling 40 pitches of mostly great granite. Most of those pitches were 50 to 65 meters and ranged from 5.6 to 5.12. We summited on just three routes, but all the other lines could be continued to their respective summits to create Grade IV or Grade V climbs. [More information and some pitch-by-pitch descriptions of climbs is at idahoaclimbingguide.com.]

—Jim Pace

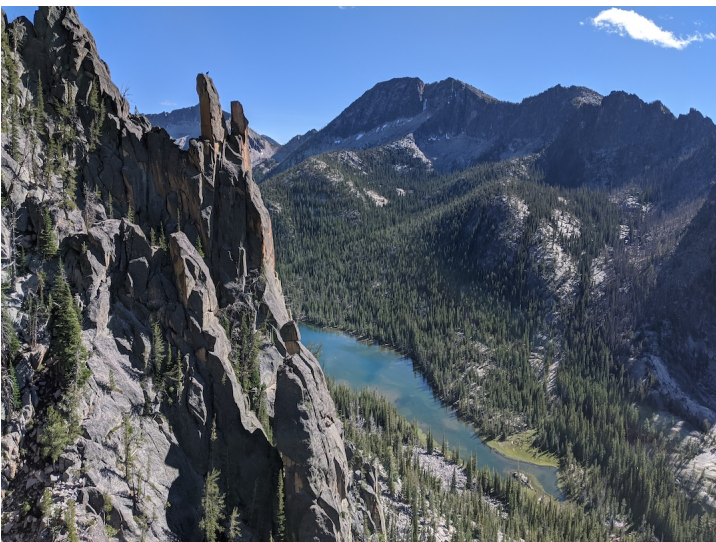
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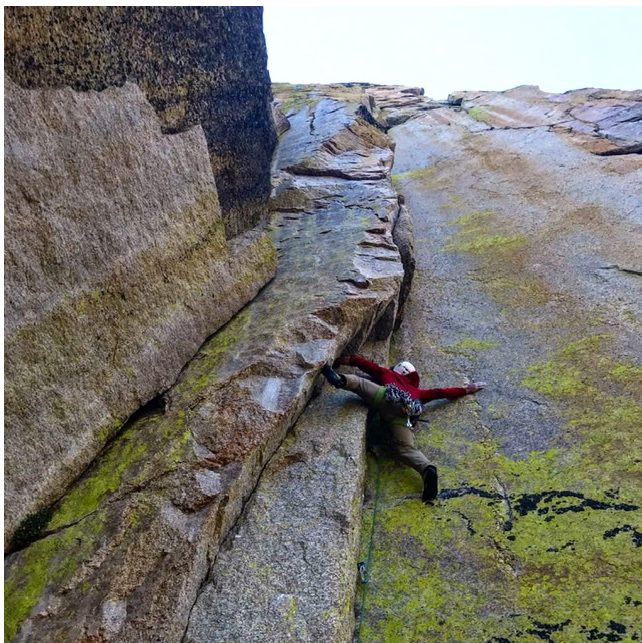
Lighthouse Tower on Wolf's Fang Ridge: The five-pitch Idahome (5.11a) ascends near the center of the formation.



Panoramic view of the crags above both sides of Ship Island Creek, which drains Ship Island Lake at left and flows down to the Middle Fork Salmon River.



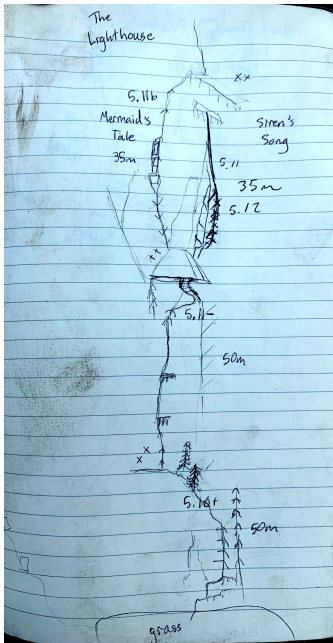
Climbers on top of the Rabbit Ears, high above Ship Island Lake.



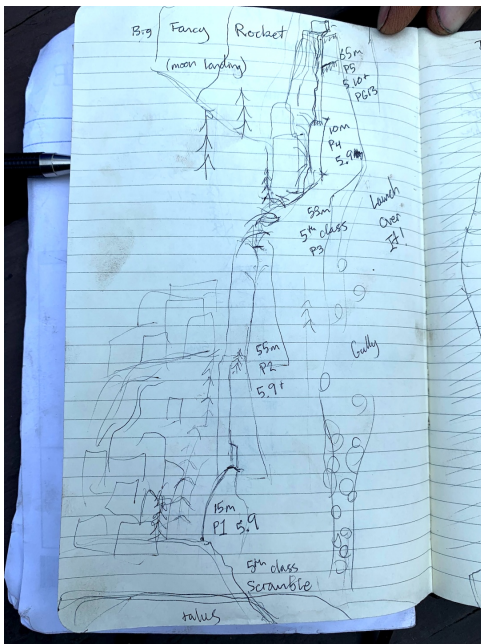
Brady Johnson stemming on Siren's Song, a 5.12 variation to the three-pitch Mermaid's Tale (5.11b), on the Bookshelf.



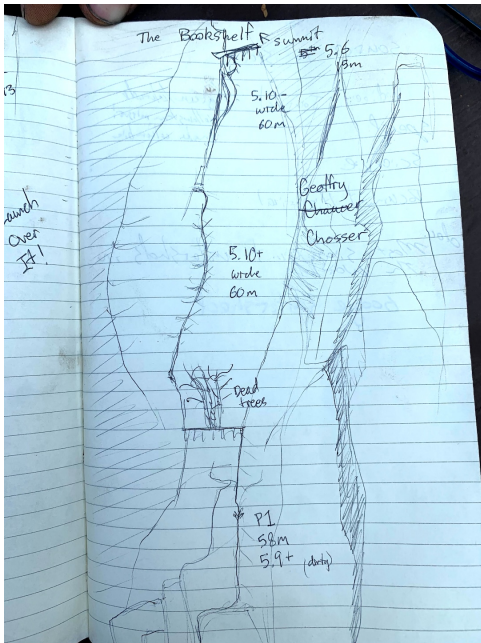
Max Bechdel on pitch two of Mermaid's Tale on Lighthouse Tower.



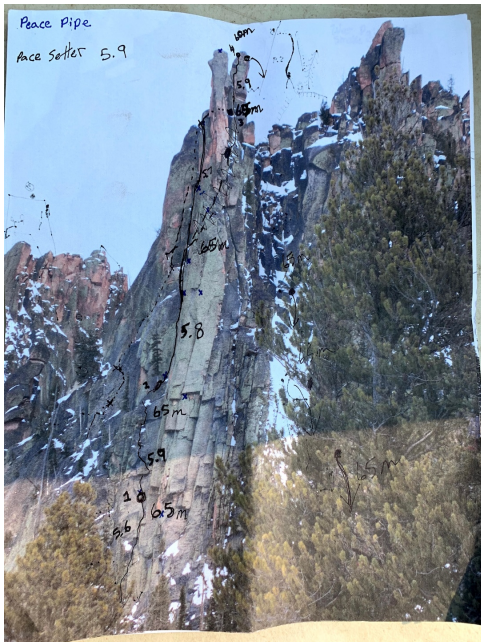
Topo for Mermaid's Tale and Siren's Song on the Lighthouse.



Topo for Launch Over It on the BFR formation.



Topo for Geoffrey Chosser on the Bookshelf.



Topo for Pace Setter on the Rabbit Ears.

Article Details

Author	Jim Pace
Publication	AAJ
Volume	67
Issue	100
Page	
Copyright Date	2026
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions