



## AAC Publications

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### The Netherworld

Utah, Fisher Towers

**I first climbed in the Fisher Towers during my freshman year of college. During the next three years, I gradually climbed one tower after the other, learning from each success and failure, until I had done them all.**

My most profound failure was on Sundevil Chimney on the Titan. Without funds to buy pitons, my partner and I purchased aluminum tent stakes at an Army surplus store. Unwilling to spend money on food, we purchased cans of wet dog food. Naive about how hot the desert could be, we hiked in only two gallons of water. And too proud to admit we didn't know where the start of Finger of Fate was, we chose Sundevil because "it was a better line." At the end of the first day, beaten, we watched the sun set on a wall behind the Titan. As the orange glow turned to dark red, a buttress stood out. I would start calling this untrodden zone—between the Titan, at the east end of the Fishers, and the Hydra, forming the west end of the Mystery Towers—the Netherworld.

Years later, I obsessed about the logistics of climbing in the Netherworld, and what I would do when faced with my own fears, in a far-out valley, high up on red Cutler sandstone.

**Hell Hound (V 5.8 A3):** Over Labor Day 2013, Jeremy Aslaksen and Hilary Bagshaw helped me hump loads behind the Titan to reach Cerebus Gendarme. With temperatures in the 90s, we could only climb two pitches over the three-day weekend.

A month and a half later, Jeremy and I were back. This time, we recruited Dave Hoven, another glutton for punishment. We were faced with freezing temperatures. After Jeremy led a short pitch, I led up a 200' section of overhanging Cutler. As I led the crux pitch over seven hours, Jeremy and Dave suffered in the cold as they were pelted with a steady stream of dirt and rock. Loose beaks in terrible rock led to a thin seam. Move by move, I dug into that spot where I had kept my prior failures and used it to fuel myself upward. Eventually the seam ended. Standing on a beak, with one small cam between me and the anchor, I finally broke down. As the wind and cold ate into my confidence, I yelled for the drill. After placing two bolts, I reached another beak-size crack and the end of the pitch. We rapped in the dark.

In November, Jeremy and I were back. Our focus was sharp, and our eyes were on the summit. Jeremy finished leading up to the caprock, and the next day I led two pitches with a finale of unprotected 5.9 offwidth moves through a roof. Pulling onto the mesa top, looking out over the Mystery Towers, the Fishers, and Castle Valley, I yelled with joy. But one climb was not enough in the Netherworld—there were other lines to explore.

**Durin's Bane (V 5.8 A2+):** In the winter 2013, Jeremy and I hiked back out to the Netherworld. We had spotted a series of roofs on a south-facing, yellow-orange wall. Below the main crack system were blank bulges. I felt strongly that the continuous upper crack system merited a bolt ladder to get there. Jeremy did not. So, solo, I worked upward, bolting and beaking to the crack system. A lot of bolts were required: 23 including anchors. But looking up from my high point, I knew the climbing would be incredible, all the way to the summit.

Over two additional weekends, we went back to complete the route. The route required only three

additional lead bolts. The crack system was excellent, one of the best I have climbed in the Fishers. The larger of two roofs overhangs about 15 feet, and is likely the most overhanging pitch in the Fisher or Mystery towers.

**Hydraform Ridge (VI 5.8 A3):** Durin's Bane and Hell Hound were just the warmups. The ridge rising from the summit of the Hydra, which we would come to call the Hydraform Ridge, was the prize. Like a bizarre, giant fence of Cutler sandstone, this ridge separates the Netherworld from the Mystery Towers. The Hydra, originally climbed in 1994 by Duane Raleigh and Tony Wilson, represented a small but fierce testpiece of Cutler climbing trickery. Our route up the ridge leading from the top of the Hydra to the Moenkopi caprock took it to a whole new level, with another 900 feet of gargoyles climbing.

Each weekend in the Netherworld left us beaten and bruised, but we persisted. With the periods of absence lasting a month or more, our desire to complete the ridge only grew.

The first pitch of our climb starts out with a lasso and takes an independent line along the prow before it meets up with the 1994 route. On the last of the Hydra's four original pitches, after a short beak seam, the ridge became blank—this was obviously where the first ascent team had famously thrown an ice axe as a grappling hook. We'd come prepared: Jeremy whipped our axe around his head and let go. The axe caught 20 feet above us. We didn't know how long it would hold. Jeremy attached his ascenders to the 7mm cord and started juggling. The axe had hooked over a small indent of sandstone. Hydra had let down her hair and let us past.

Crossing the spectacular fin of the Hydra required unnerving acrobatics, running and jumping from one hoodoo to the next. Being on untrodden ground, we were unsure if these formations would support body weight. As ravens sailed in the dry breeze, we topped out to the upper plateau with thunderclouds rolling in. With lightning flashing and thunder booming, we made the long rappels down the face, now flowing in mud. Covered in grime and fear-sweat, we collapsed at the base. After 10 months, we had finally completed the Hydraform Ridge.

– Joe Forrester

## Images



Joe Forrester and Jeremy Aslaksen work across the complex gendarmes of Hydraform Ridge, a massive route located between the Fisher and Mystery towers.



Line of the route Durin's Bane.



The full Hydraform Ridge. The route starts on the opposite side and then more or less follows the skyline to the top.



Jeremy Aslaksen prepares for the ice axe throw on the Hydra, the start of the Hydraform Ridge.



Line of the route Hell Hound on Cerberus Gendarme.

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