



AAC Publications

Cartago Creek Gorge, New Routes

California, Eastern Sierra

In April, three new routes were established on the large formations bordering the Cartago Creek Gorge, west of Highway 395 near the town of Cartago. On the 21st, Brian Prince and I hiked heavy loads deep into the gorge to the previously unclimbed Cartago Wall. This 1,600' southeast-facing cliff can be seen way back in the canyon from the highway. Much of the five-hour approach consisted of barefooted bushwhacking in the creek bed and polished fifth-class climbing around many waterfalls, all while being attacked by swarms of biting red ants. This approach ranks highest on my list of "Most Difficult and Unpleasant Hikes in California."

After establishing camp, we examined the steep cliff and found very few weaknesses. The following morning, Brian and I started up the logical and best-looking line—a crack system leading directly to the prominent northern subsummit of the Cartago Wall. We climbed the route in eight full 60m pitches, all of which were in the 5.10 range on high-quality granite, with a short 5.10+ offwidth crux at the start and a 5.11a roof at mid-height. We left no fixed gear on the climb and descended by scrambling down a ramp to the north and making many rappels off trees. An extra night's sleep and some pain meds were required before summoning the courage for the hike back down to the car. Much like the classic Western saying, the gargantuan effort left us feeling "rode hard and put away wet," and we called the route Saddle Sores (1,600', IV 5.11a).

On April 30, Peter Pribik and I climbed a new route on the Crystal Geyser Crag (a.k.a. Olancho Crag). This is the large formation visible to the west from Highway 395 at the Crystal Geyser bottling plant in Olancho. There are many buttresses or "towers" that make up the cliff, and our seven-pitch route ascends the narrow buttress just right of the longest central one (also home to an excellent, unreported 11-pitch route called Hard Grit (IV 5.11 R), established by Myles Moser and Amy Ness in January 2016). Our line consisted of mostly moderate crack climbing on poor-quality, grainy desert granite. We saw no signs of prior passage, and the heaps of uncleaned choss on the line led us to believe we were the first ones up this buttress. We called our route Sheriff Stanley (1,200', III-IV 5.10). After tagging the northern summit, we descended via double-rope rappels down a route on the buttress to the right. This line, Buckle Up Buckaroo (1,200', III 5.11), had been climbed just two weeks earlier, on April 15, by Myles Moser, Amy Ness, and Brandon Thau. In addition to the climbs mentioned above, four other unreported routes (both new and old, from five to eight pitches long) stretched across this broad formation as of early 2018.

– Richard Shore

Images



Crystal Geyser Crag, in the Cartago Creek drainage, showing the three new routes completed in April 2017. From left to right: Hard Grit (IV 5.11 R, Moser-Ness), Sheriff Stanley (1,200', III/IV 5.10, Pribik-Shore), Buckle Up Buckaroo (1,200', III 5.11, Moser-Ness-Thau).



Brian Prince on the barefoot bushwhack approach up the Cartago Creek drainage. The day after this five-hour sufferfest, Prince and Richard Shore made the first ascent of Saddle Sores (1,600', IV 5.11a) on the Cartago Wall.



Richard Shore on the second pitch of Saddle Sores (1,600', IV 5.11a), the first ascent of the Cartago Wall. This large formation is visible to the west from Highway 395 near the town of Cartago.



Brian Prince on the summit of the Cartago Wall after making the first ascent via Saddle Sores (1,600', IV 5.11a). The dry bed of Owens Lake is visible in the distance.



Cartago Wall from summit of Crystal Geyser Crag, showing the line of Saddle Sores (1,600', IV 5.11a). Brian Prince and Richard Shore endured a heinous five-hour bushwhack approach up Cartago Creek to reach the south-facing, 1,600' cliff.

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