



## AAC Publications

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### **Mystery Dome, West Face, Bitter Fruit**

Idaho, Bitterroot Mountains

**The idea of a free ascent of Mystery Dome had been lodged in the back of my mind since happening across the trip report of the first and only known technical ascent (see AAJ 2014).** The details of the first ascent, a bold and committing 13-pitch route up the southwest arête, clocking in at 5.10 A3, hardly invited thoughts of a free ascent. Nevertheless, with such an inspiring wall in one's own backyard, my thoughts echoed those of first ascensionist Steve Porcella—what if?

Mystery Dome pushed its way to the front of my mind when I found myself back home in Montana with time on my hands during 2020. Between June 20 and 22, friends Ryan Garnsey, Brendan Campbell, Elissa Taylor, and I made a scouting trip up White Cap Creek Trail from the end of the Magruder Corridor Road. We reached the base of Mystery Dome after a nearly 20-mile approach marked by tenuous creek crossings and muddy conditions. Among a trio of potential free lines identified, a long, curved dihedral on the west face appeared most promising.

I returned to the area from July 20-24 to make an attempt on the west face with Ben Holmgren. My father, Doug Wollant, accompanied us and fished. Unfortunately, poor weather throughout the trip permitted only a single attempt that was cut short by rain after just 500' of climbing.

Despite the bitterness of logging nearly 80 miles hiking up White Cap Creek, numerous hours of planning, and days spent scouting and staging on the previous two trips coming to naught, I decided to roll the dice one final time on the climb to see if the route might come to fruition. It was uncertain when or if another chance to make an attempt on Mystery Dome would materialize for me due to graduate school commitments that would pull me elsewhere for the coming five years.

I was able to recruit Liam Brown for my final attempt. We hiked in on August 24, and after enjoying a rest day, we set off on the west face at 7 a.m. on August 26. Our line deviated from my previous attempt on the lower slab pitches in a marginally successful attempt to avoid runouts encountered before. After reaching the lower-angle base of the main dihedral, we regained the previous highpoint and set off on new terrain. The dihedral pitches were characterized by long runouts between small, often marginal placements. Other than the crux (pitch 6), all pitches were freed ground up, on lead. The crux was first aided in order to clean the pitch before freeing it. After pitch six, we chose to bypass the last 250' of the dihedral by way of a crack system out and left in hopes of moving fast to avoid a potential storm on the horizon. The unclimbed top of the dihedral remains a worthy and aesthetic potential addition to the line. We reached the summit eleven hours after tying in for the first pitch. The ascent was entirely clean with no pins or bolts placed in respect of and adherence to the current bolting ban in the Bitterroot National Forest. A one-hour descent via a gully to the northwest returned us to our basecamp before we hiked out the following day.

To my knowledge, ours is the second technical ascent of Mystery Dome, the first ascent of the west face, and the first free ascent of the feature. The route, Bitter Fruit, covers 1,650' over 10 pitches with difficulties up to 5.11- and several R-rated sections. We would like to thank the first ascensionists for the inspiration provided through their original report.

— Benjamin Wollant

## Images



The west face of Mystery Dome in the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho, showing the line of Bitter Fruit (1,650' of climbing, 10 pitches, 5.11-). The original route, the southwest arête (2012) is near the right skyline.



The south face of Mystery Dome as seen from the approach up the Whitecap Creek Trail. The southwest arête (2012) takes the left skyline.



Scouting the west face of Mystery Dome during the initial reconnaissance trip. Mystery Dome lies 20

miles deep in the backcountry of Idaho's Bitterroot Mountains.



Looking down the lower pitches on the route during the first ascent of Bitter Fruit (1,650' of climbing, 10 pitches, 5.11-) on the west face of Mystery Dome, in Idaho's Bitterroot Mountains.



Liam Brown working into the layback above the thin crux on pitch six of Bitter Fruit (1,650' of climbing, 10 pitches, 5.11-) on the west face of Mystery Dome.



Liam Brown psyched to be on the summit of Mystery Dome after completing the first ascent of Bitter Fruit (1,650' of climbing, 10 pitches, 5.11-).

## Article Details

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