



AAC Publications

Hit by a Wheeler

Nevada, Great Basin Ranges, Wheeler Peak

The route line of Hit by a Wheeler (also known as the Marvell-Wharton) on the northeast face of Wheeler Peak, Nevada. Photo by Josh Wharton

In winter 2021, like many of us, I was hungry for a traditional adventure, one that didn't involve N-95 masks at the grocery store or Zoom calls with my daughter's kindergarten class. I also wanted something within driving distance, which, given the ongoing pandemic and building climate crisis, felt less ethically dubious than flying halfway across the world to a developing country with limited medical infrastructure.

Dusting the cobwebs off my Netflix-stunted brain, I thought of Wheeler Peak (13,167') in Nevada. Wheeler had come onto my radar over Pakistani base camp snacks with the late Kyle Dempster. He described it as a hidden gem, a place where one could prepare for trips to Asia and Alaska. He didn't elaborate, but I made a mental note that I should have a look someday.

Wheeler Peak is located in Great Basin National Park, on the eastern edge of Nevada. Although climbing in the area has been limited due to loose rock, there has been a fair bit of activity through the years, much of which is detailed in James Garrett's excellent guidebook *Utah's West Desert*. There has been precious little winter climbing on Wheeler, in part because the scenic road that takes you near the base is closed in those months. I could find no report of the northeast face having seen a winter ascent.

I reached out to Jackson Marvell, a motivated young alpinist from the Salt Lake City area whom I'd met on a trip to Mt. Hooker in Wyoming. On our first trip to Wheeler in mid-February, we skied in via the Lehman Creek Trail, which was fairly reasonable, being well-traveled by snowshoers. Highs were in the single digits. The cirque was covered in rime and snow, and both of us were impressed by the steepness of Wheeler's northeast face, rearing above the morainal remnants of an old glacier. We settled in for a bivy.

The next morning, conditions were still arctic. We did our best, but the stove and fuel couldn't handle the frosty conditions, and we started up without any water. Despite a valiant effort by Jackson to get us to the upper wall, we turned around soon after things steepened. I had followed every pitch wearing a huge belay parka and puff pants, and I never overheated. One of Jackson's hands had started to turn purple. We rapped, eager to return in kinder weather.

Jackson Marvell low on the northeast face of Wheeler peak, during his and Josh Wharton's first attempt in February 2021 Photo by Josh Wharton

A few weeks later, on March 14, we returned in much better temperatures, with highs in the upper 20s (F) at 13,000'. I was fresh off a sport climbing trip to St. George, where I'd had a couple of "good for me" days with a 5.14b redpoint and a 5.13c flash. Wheeler and sport climbing are about as dissimilar as hockey and figure skating, though, so I ate a lot of snacks on the drive between St. George and Great Basin National Park in anticipation of some serious shivering.

Jackson and I once more started skiing toward the northeast face. After six hours of laborious trail breaking in sticky snow, we settled in for the night, ready for a second crack at the wall.

The next morning we took a slightly steeper and more direct route than on our previous attempt. We climbed a black water runnel and chimney to gain a large snow ledge below the upper face. Most of the terrain was snow-covered rock, which we climbed with our tools and crampons—the sort of nebulous ground that often constitutes the true cruxes of alpine routes. As on our first trip, Jackson impressed me with his ability to move quickly and competently on this terrain.

For the most part, the rock was high-quality quartzite, but it was stacked precariously, as though a group of six-years-olds had clumsily assembled a Jenga tower. Climbing the wall when the blocks are properly frozen in place would be fantastic; as it was, with the weather still dry, seemingly solid blocks sometimes shifted unexpectedly. At one point during my first lead, in the middle of the wall, I was placing a cam when the ledge I was standing on collapsed. Fortunately, I held onto my tools, and I made a mental note to treat everything with suspicion going forward.

Likely unclimbed walls and buttresses lining the southern edge of Wheeler's east-facing cirque. Josh Wharton

We wove our way up the steep central portion of the wall, climbing about 2,000' in all, with eight long pitches from the base to the summit, which included a fair bit of simul-climbing. The climbing was never totally desperate, but it was almost always engaging. Toward the top, we joined the upper ramp of Stella by Starlight, an impressive route up the northeast face's right flank climbed roped solo by Wade Mills in June 1978. Though we found no signs of previous passage on the ramp, it's likely the pins from 40 years ago have long since fallen into the chossy abyss, or that the ramp was well iced when first climbed.

We topped out into building snow squalls and wrapped around to the east through an easy gully that brought us back to the base of the mountain. The return to the cars was a long, crash-filled affair on my skinny cross-country skis. I encouraged Jackson to go on ahead with his more capable ski-touring kit.

The drive home gave me time to reflect on the risks of routes like this. For me, being reckless is best avoided, but occasional calculated risk is often worth the experience, and the bonds it builds. I won't be doing regular trips up Wheeler, but living wild days like Jackson and I had on the northeast face makes life sweeter. We called our route Hit by a Wheeler (a.k.a. the Marvell- Wharton) and gave it the tongue-in-cheek grade of V2 M6 X.

For those in search of their own wild days, there is huge potential for alpine routes in the Wheeler Peak area, from gully romps to sustained steep dry-tooling routes. I suspect weather windows in the spring and fall would be the best times to find the walls solidly frozen into place. The climbing on the northeast face felt similar to some of my climbs on the big north faces in the Canadian Rockies, something I have not encountered elsewhere in the Lower 48.

Bring pitons and an eagerness for adventure.

— Josh Wharton

Images



The route line of Hit by a Wheeler (also known as the Marvell-Wharton) on the northeast face of Wheeler Peak, Nevada.



Jackson Marvell low on the northeast face of Wheeler peak, during his and Josh Wharton's first attempt in February 2021



Likely unclimbed walls and buttresses lining the southern edge of Wheeler's east-facing cirque.



Jackson Marvell leading the final difficulties of his and Josh Wharton's new route, Hit by a Wheeler, on Wheeler Peak, Nevada. This section likely climbs the same terrain followed by the 1978 route Stella by Starlight.



Josh Wharton leading one of the many Jenga-like pitches high on the northeast face of Wheeler Peak.



After completing the first ascent of Hit by a Wheeler, on his and Jackson Marvell's second trip, Josh Wharton walks off the summit of Wheeler Peak.



Josh Wharton sitting below Wheeler Peak, contemplating possible lines, during his and Jackson Marvell's unsuccessful first attempt on the northeast face.

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