



AAC Publications

Timber Top Mesa, The Avalon Valley Club

United States, Utah, Zion National Park, Kolob Canyons

When I went to Zion National Park for the first time, I intended to climb the Thunderbird Wall, on the north face of Timber Top Mesa (8,055'), in Kolob Canyons. I thought better of it after one glance at that monster face, and retreated to the main canyon to climb shorter trade routes. That was four years ago. Ever since, I've kept a topo of the Thunderbird Wall, now coffee-stained and covered with illegible scribbles, taped to my dashboard.

The north face of Timber Top has seen few ascents. Soaring 2,000' from base to summit, it was first climbed by Ron Olevsky and Earl Redfern, who completed the Thunderbird Wall route in 1986 after five attempts and called it Grade VI—a rarity in Zion. In 2006, the all-star team of Mike Anderson and Rob Pizem freed the Thunderbird Wall at 5.13- R. Until now, this was the only complete route up the face.

On a rainy rest day in April, I walked alone on the 3.5-mile approach toward the north face with a spotting scope, my excitement building the closer I got. In the preceding 12 months, I'd climbed five new big wall routes in Zion and was feeling ready. Soon I was looking at a nearly continuous crack system to the left of Thunderbird. There was only one noticeable blank section.

My friends Mike Dunn and Ky Hart were game for an attempt. We canceled appointments, sorted a rack and ropes, acquired permits, rationed whiskey, and stockpiled food and water for a seven-day mission. We fixed lines on some opening slab pitches, and on April 29 committed to the wall. When I found an old bolt on the first pitch, and a little higher above that an old anchor, we got discouraged. Had this line been climbed and not recorded? But it was soon apparent that whoever had been up there had retreated after one pitch. The climbing above was classic Zion aid: thin, dirty placements in sometimes rotten rock, and always spectacular.

After four pitches we were staring into the abyss of the blank section we'd seen from below. It was Mike's lead. He climbed straight up the wall until the crack died, drilled a bolt, and quested off on ten continuous hook moves (many enhanced), cracking the biggest unknown of the route. It was a heroic effort, especially on Navajo sandstone, so soft that even enhanced holes routinely blow out under weighted hooks. I don't recall him making a sound as he floated up the orange face, even as Ky and I swilled beers down at the belay and heckled him to hurry things up.

Later that evening, I retreated off pitch seven when rain and hail drenched us. A nearby lightning bolt got our full attention. We hunkered under a tarp while the storm blew over, then bivied for a third consecutive night at the sixth-pitch anchor. By the next night, we had reached a spacious bivy on top of pitch nine. For the first time on the route, we felt confident we would make the top.

On May 3, our fifth day on the route, we climbed three pitches, hiked through a burnt pine forest, and stood together on the summit. The views are always exceptional in Zion, but this one was transcendent. We could see from Cedar City to St. George, from the snow-capped Pine Valley Mountains to the streets of Toquerville. We named the route The Avalon Valley Club (2,000', 12 pitches, V 5.9 A3), after an insane asylum in one of my favorite books, a place to which the main character returns over and over. Two days later, when I drove north to start my seasonal river-guiding job in Idaho, I passed the turn to Kolob Canyons and noted that I still hadn't climbed the Thunderbird Wall. That route's topo is staying on the dash for now.

Images



Ky Hart and Matt Ward enjoying brief sunshine on the north face of Timber Top Mesa, at the third pitch bivy on The Avalon Valley Club (2,000', 12 pitches, V 5.9 A3).



The slabby approach pitches to the north face of Timbertop Mesa and The Avalon Valley Club (2,000', 12 pitches, V 5.9 A3).



Looking down on the bivy from the top of pitch four of The Avalon Valley Club (2,000', 12 pitches, V 5.9 A3) on the north face of Timber Top Mesa, Zion National Park, Utah. Mike Dunn, Ky Hart, and Matt Ward spent five days on the wall for the first ascent.



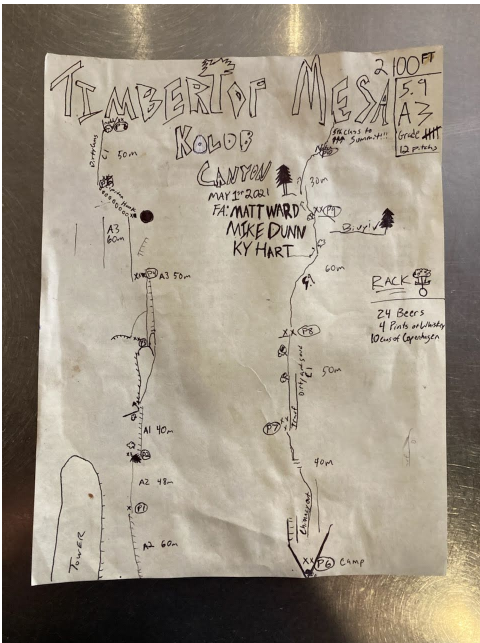
Ky Hart and Matt Ward on a snowbank at the base of the route before the team committed to the wall.



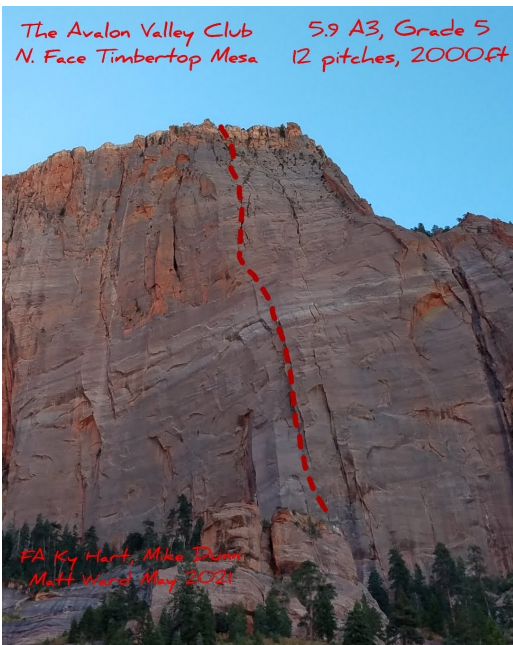
Matt Ward climbing pitch three of The Avalon Valley Club (2,000', 12 pitches, V 5.9 A3) on the north face of Timber Top Mesa, Zion National Park, Utah.



Mike Dunn about to quest off on hooks on pitch five of The Avalon Valley Club. In one section of this pitch, Dunn made ten consecutive hook moves.



The Avalon Valley Club (2,000', 12 pitches, V 5.9 A3) on the north face of Timber Top Mesa, Zion National Park, Utah.



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Article Details

Author	Matt Ward
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	138
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions