



AAC Publications

Chiefs Head, Northeast Face, Highwayman

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Glacier Gorge

The route line of Highwayman (350m, 13 pitches, 5.11 R), the free version of the first route on the northeast face of Chiefs Head, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Maximilian Barlerin, Sebastian Barlerin, and Zack Fisher worked to free the original line—which was established in 1963 by Layton Kor and Bob Bradley—over several days in 2020 and 2021. Photo by Maximilian Barlerin

People have been climbing the walls and spires ringing Glacier Gorge, in the heart of Rocky Mountain National Park, for over 100 years. Seemingly every major crack system has had at least one piton beaten into it, and some of the best climbers from several generations have established classics in this wonderful cirque. To establish a free route on one of these walls had been a dream of mine, but I felt that pretty much everything worth climbing there had already been done.

After crawling up the dark wet center of the northeast face of Chiefs Head, and fulfilling my dream in the process, I still think that is more or less true.

Over the course of several days in 2020 and 2021, my brother Sebastien Barlerin, Zack Fisher, and I established Highwayman (350m, 13 pitches, 5.11 R). It is a free version of the first route on the northeast face of Chiefs Head, climbed by Layton Kor and Bob Bradley in a two-day outing in 1963, at IV 5.8 A3. Their line followed an ominous dark corner system creeping up the center of the northeast face, capped by three large roof systems that seep all summer long.

Over two long days in the summers of 2020 and 2021, Sebastien and I aided and cleaned this rotten corner system. The glacier below has receded so much since the first ascent that it required an additional 30m to 40m of climbing through piles of loose rock to reach what we believe was the base of the original first pitch. The third pitch—the original route's second pitch, an A3—was the most exciting. We bypassed corners of rotten rock by climbing an unprotected water-stained 5.11 face to their left, eventually regaining cracks higher up. After this, the rock quality deteriorated considerably, and the cold, slimy corners became increasingly difficult to avoid.

On these first attempts we did not go to the top of the route; we got about halfway up. I cleaned out one of the harder looking cracks so that it could take cams and be free climbed later. Our hope was to clean up the line enough to encourage repeats—assuming we eventually finished it off ourselves—but we eventually gave up on this prospect because there was simply too much loose rock. After trundling as many of the large rocks as we could and placing a bolt on the A3 original second pitch (our 5.11 third pitch), we retreated.

In August 2021, I returned with Zack Fisher for a continuous free ascent. Committed to our cause, I managed to free climb pitch five, an icy and dripping layback crack (5.11 wet). I built a hanging belay below the first of several large roof traverses to avoid two huge and precarious rock daggers at the lip. We tiptoed past this hangfire, pulling out old rusted pitons by hand along the way. After these difficulties, the route eased off quite a bit, and we were able to navigate via the path of least resistance up the most solid rock on the face. We stayed on the line of first ascent, which bypasses a final roof by climbing to the left of it. The face soon rounded off and brought us to talus on the summit ridge of Chiefs Head, where we enjoyed the sun that had never reached us on the face below.

While by no means a classic, this and the other routes on Chiefs Head have an adventurousness that offers the modern climber at least a small taste of what Kor and Bradley would have found in 1963.

– Maximilian Barlerin

Images



Zach Fisher following the icy wet laypack of pitch five (5.11) on Highwayman (350m, 13 pitches, 5.11 R), on the northeast face of Chiefs Head, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.



Old piton and bong recovered from the northeast face of Chiefs Head, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Maximilian Barlerin and Zack Fisher were able to pull these out by hand during their one-day first free ascent of the route.



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Sebastien Barlerin following pitch four of Highwayman (350m, 13 pitches, 5.11 R), a free variation of the 1963 original route on the northeast face of Chiefs Head, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

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