



## AAC Publications

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### **Johannesburg Mountain, Northeast Rib, Flight of the Bumblebee**

United States, Washington, Cascade Range

**Ever since I started climbing, I have been enamored with the massive north face of Johannesburg Mountain.** From the 8,100' summit, the face drops dramatically for over a vertical mile, straight down to the Cascade River. The face is complex, with only a few distinct lines. The most obvious and longest feature is the 1957 Northeast Rib. There are a couple of other moderate testpieces of munge climbing that were first climbed in the 1950s, but they all avoid an obvious big wall that sits at the base of the Northeast Rib. This wall rises 1,200' from the valley floor. When driving up to the Cascade Pass trailhead, the wall seemingly hangs over the road and is the most eye-catching feature around. Ironically, when viewed from higher up in the alpine—and compared with the rest of the north face—it looks small. I think it is for this reason that it has flown under the radar for so many years, despite its close proximity to the trailhead.

Near the end of September 2021, I convinced my partner Lani Chapko to check out this wall with me. We were fresh off of a 25-day streak of alpine guiding and not in the best mindset. Both of us backed off a lead roughly halfway up, convincing ourselves it looked like 5.11 X. Afterward, winter settled in and shut down any thoughts of a second attempt.

By September 2022, I was ready to try again. I knew deep down that climbing Jo-Berg was a particular kind of stupid into which I could only rope one person: my friend Kyle Willis. Our plan was to climb the sit start to the ridge as a mini big wall, then continue up the standard Northeast Rib route to the summit.

The approach to the wall may be one of the shortest in the North Cascades, a quick jaunt mostly downhill from the trailhead. A few hundred feet of fifth-class devil's club laybacking guarded an obvious gully that marked our rope-up point. From here, we climbed munge gullies with occasional exposed Skagit gneiss to reach my previous high point. This time we'd brought an old Forest Mjolnir hammer and a robust rack of beaks—kit that would prove invaluable on the super compact metamorphic rock.

Battling mossy cracks, we discovered moderate—albeit steep and wild—climbing. We climbed until darkness set in and rigged a hanging bivy using two Dyneema hammocks. The next day, we continued up similar terrain, with a couple of dangerous runouts and the steepest moss and tree pitch I've ever climbed. The wall eventually relented and returned to familiar 80° forest rambling. On the last pitch of steep forest before the top, I stuck my hand into a bee's nest and was engulfed by an angry swarm. I let go of the wall and took a tumbling 40' fall past a tree that (thankfully) acted as a piece of natural lead protection. I heard a loud pop when I slammed into the wall. I was convinced I'd broken my left ankle; I could not bear weight. I belayed Kyle up so we could discuss our options. It was too late to begin rappelling, so we decided to go up until we found a ledge. Kyle led a long moderate pitch, and I followed, using my knee. We bedded down for the night on a nice heather knoll on the shallow saddle that separates the lower wall from the remainder of the ridge—the first place where we had obviously linked into the 1957 route.

My ankle was no better in the morning, so we decided to rappel our new route, a dreadful endeavor with one rope and countless dubious anchors. We used a Beal Escaper to get down the bulk of the wall with long single-rope rappels, rappelling about 2,000' in all. From the talus at the base of Johannesburg, I was able to hobble back to the car. My ankle ended up being sprained, not broken.

We summited the big wall we had set out to climb, but failed to tag the summit. Flight of the Bumblebee has about 1,500' of climbing and is IV 5.9 R. Given the dangerous and dirty climbing, it's unlikely to be repeated, but it would be great to see someone link it into the 1957 route and take it to the top!

— **Sam Boyce**

## Images



Sam Boyce leading the fifth pitch of Flight of the Bumblebee (1,500' of climbing, IV 5.9 R) Johannesburg Mountain, North Cascades, Washington.



Sam Boyce hanging out in a Taco Portaledge, made by High Mountain Gear, at the first of two bivies during his and Kyle Willis' first ascent of Flight of the Bumblebee (1,500' of climbing, IV 5.9 R) on Johannesburg Mountain.



Sam Boyce leading the seventh pitch Flight of the Bumblebee (1,500' of climbing, IV 5.9 R) Johannesburg Mountain, North Cascades, Washington.



Kyle Willis making a steep rappel during his and Sam Boyce's descent from their new start to the Northeast Buttress of Johannesburg Mountain.



The red line shows the general route of Flight of the Bumblebee (1,500' of climbing, IV 5.9 R) on the lower north face of Johannesburg Mountain. Sam Boyce and Kyle Willis made the first ascent in September 2022, rappelling from the top of the lower wall where it intersects the 1957 Northeast Rib route (purple).



The huge north face of Johannesburg Mountain (8,100'). The northeast rib descends directly from the summit. Flight of the Bumblebee (Boyce-Willis, 2022) climbs the relatively unvegetated 1,200-foot wall at the base of the northeast rib, ending in the forested slopes partway up.

## Article Details

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