



AAC Publications

Innominate and Buffalo Back, Various New Routes

United States, Wyoming, Bighorn Mountains

When Mark Jenkins, Dougald MacDonald, and I first ventured into the Sawtooth Lakes basin, which flows northeast from a small glacier at the foot of Mt. Woolsey (12,978') and Innominate (12,641'), in 2015, we wandered up three glorious routes on virgin walls (best we could tell), but we didn't do more than ogle the biggest and baddest wall: the northeast face of Innominate (see AAJ 2016). Mark and I hoped to return the next year to climb it. Instead, it took us seven years to return, only to fail.

Our chosen line for July 2022 turned out to be bigger and badder than we were. After traversing the snowfield at the base (using a set of crampons and an ice tool), Mark and I, along with Martin Zupan, an Ecuadorian American colleague of mine at the Leysin American School (LAS) in Switzerland, scratched our way up hundreds of feet of disgusting gully until Mark could lead us up one pitch of 5.10ish offwidth that he expected would reach a series of cracks on the headwall. Alas, the cracks were guarded by overhanging blankness.

Instead, we continued slithering up the "approach" gully, a diagonal gash that defines the base of the wall we had intended to climb. We named this ten-pitch route Dead Buzzard Gully in honor of both the quality of the climbing and the foulness of the turkey vulture carcass we found en route. Between us, Mark and I have well over a century of climbing experience, so we know what we're talking about when we tell you it's the worst route we've ever done. If this report has any value in the history of climbing, it will be to keep you out of that gully. The physical cruxes were passing chockstones (5.10), and the mental cruxes were preventing hand- and footholds from sweeping down the gully and killing the belayers. [Editor's Note: The only known summit route up the northeast side of Innominate was done in 1967 by Fred Beckey, Doug Leen, and Roger Johnson, who climbed in and near a gully on the left side of the face.]

Our route led to a little summit, but not of Innominate—instead it's a subsidiary summit that might (or should) be called Little Innominate (~12,500'). By far the best rock of the route was the last 20 feet to this peaklet. We hoped we might be the first to reach this peaklet, but we found fixed nuts on top to rappel from.

A few days earlier, the three of us, plus Simon Curson, a Brit and another colleague at LAS in Switzerland, had ascended a nearby route that we actually *would* recommend: Wrangler Bob (10 pitches, 5.10-) on Spire-O-Wigwam, which we presume was formerly virgin. More culturally sensitive folks have suggested we shouldn't use the term "wigwam," but it's to honor the dude ranch Spire-O-Wigwam, which provided the horses that carried our gear into the mountains, and which the colorful Wrangler Bob co-owns. Due to a lack of number 5 cams, we never would have summited this spire if our offwidth wizard Mark didn't feel that protection was for wimps. After I backed off the lead, Mark cruised up it and gave us a top-rope on the crux section of 5.10- arm-barring (totally out of character with the rest of the route's excellent face and small cracks). I'm proud to have helped to introduce Martin to climbing just three years earlier, and this route was his introduction to new-routing in the mountains. Simon had been climbing in the alpine for a couple of decades, but this was also his introduction to new-routing. In fact this trip was his introduction to climbing in America, with stops in Oregon, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado before Wyoming. He's now well versed in country music and hellfire preachers on the radio while barreling through wide-open landscapes.

Our Anglo-Ecuadorian-American team from Switzerland also managed three new lines on the east face of Buffalo Back (ca 12,280'), on which Mark, Dougald, and I may have climbed the first technical route back in 2015. Mark and Martin's eight-pitch Redemption (5.10-) includes some of the finest granite we've ever finger-locked (thus providing redemption from the stain of Dead Buzzard Gully). Their three-pitch More Pro Please (5.10) climbs to the top of what we're calling the Fist on Buffalo Back's lower wall. Simon and I climbed The Proposal (5.10-), also on the Fist, named in honor of his planned proposal to his girlfriend, Katel. East-facing Buffalo Back is the first large wall as you enter the basin and perches just above the only decent tenting- with-water spots in the upper valley that we discovered during both of our trips.

We paid for horses to bring our gear over Highland Park to the end of the maintained trail at Kearney Creek. From there a faint trail leads into the basin. This fisherman's and peakbagger's trail was significantly more used by 2022 than it had been seven years earlier. Also, the 4WD road from Little Goose Creek to the edge of the Cloud Peak Wilderness had significantly degraded during those years.

— John Harlin III

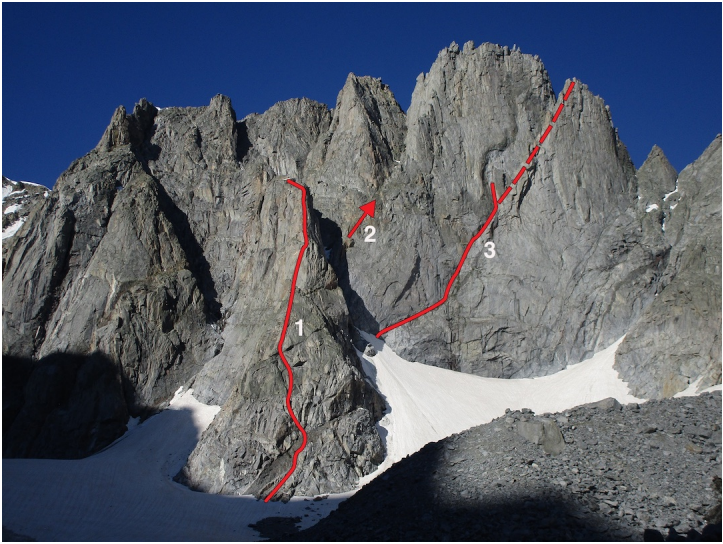
Images



John Harlin III experiencing the joys of the Dead Buzzard Gully on Innominate in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains.



John Harlin III surmounting one of the chockstones in the Dead Buzzard Gully on Innominate.



The northeast face of Innominate. (1) Wrangler Bob (10 pitches, 5.10-) on Spire- O-Wigwam, climbed in 2022. (2) Approximate line of the 1967 route (Beckey-Leen-Johnson), continuing to Innominate's summit. (3) Dead Buzzard Gully (2022), showing the abbreviated attempt on the northeast face and continuation to "Little Innominate."



The east face of Buffalo Back showing (1) Buffalo Gal (5.10-, Harlin-Jenkins-MacDonald, 2015); (2) The Proposal (5.10-, Curson-Harlin, 2022); (3) More Pro Please (5.10, Jenkins-Zupan, 2022); and (4) Redemption (5.10-, Jenkins-Zupan, 2022). The 2022 climbers labeled the feature below the big ledge "The Fist."



Simon Curson climbing on Redemption on Buffalo Back.



Martin Zupan following the gorgeous third pitch of Redemption on Buffalo Back.



John Harlin III leading the final pitch of The Proposal on Buffalo Back.

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