



AAC Publications

Cannon Cliff, Across the Great Divide, Free Ascent

New Hampshire, White Mountains

Over two days in March, along with Pat Cooke and Seth Fisher, I pieced together the first free ascent of Across the Great Divide, an old aid line on Cannon Cliff. The route travels along the wall that forms the left side of the famous Black Dike (500', 3 pitches, WI4 M3).

Peter Cole and Rick Wilcox completed the first ascent of Across the Great Divide, in November 1975, at 5.7 A4. In the spring of 1985, Steve Larson and Jim Surette freed the first pitch as a rock climb at 5.11. Their effort raised an interesting question about whether the route should be attempted as a rock climb or a winter climb, and if either would preclude the other for future suitors. Following in the footsteps of the first ascensionists, I began attempting it as a winter climb in the fall of 2021, and was grateful for the frozen turf and dribbles of ice holding a couple of looser sections onto the cliff.

On March 9, I led up the first three pitches with Seth Fisher. The first two pitches (which can be led as one) culminate in an incredible M7 traverse across a blank face, ending at a hanging stance on an are te. From here, the third pitch launches into a diagonal weakness that brings you sharply away from the sun of the classic Whitney-Gilman Ridge (6 pitches, 5.7), on the left are te of the wall, and closer to the depths of the Black Dike. Pitch three has diverse climbing in the M6 range. I tried the fourth pitch that day, but did not send. We fixed the ropes to our high point and rapped to the ground.

The following day, I returned with Pat Cooke. We juggled the ropes and I barely squeaked out a send of the reasonably protected fourth pitch, blowing off a fresh dusting of snow from the footholds as I went along. At M8, this was the crux pitch. It ended at an antique pair of bolts—a hanging belay directly beneath the route's A4 pitch. Knowing that this next lead was likely to be serious, we bolted a new belay five feet to the left of those old bolts; if I blew it and ripped any of the marginal gear along the way, I would now fall past Pat rather than onto him.

On my first attempt, I weighted the rope once as I tried to figure out some marginal gear placements. I continued upward, hooking my tools on tiny features in a small corner. When I reached the top of the pitch, I built a pin anchor, lowered off and cleaned my gear, and pulled the rope. I then sent the A4 pitch—now M6+ R. It involved a handful of big moves above gear such as cams nested in flakes, knifeblades, a passive red ball nut, and a number 2 Pecker.

The sun was setting as Pat made it to the top of pitch five. He then took us to the top in one long M5 pitch, giggling as he kept on the are te as long as possible, just right of the Whitney-Gilman, before joining that route at its end.

The free version of Across the Great Divide (550', 6 pitches, M8 R) is a great new addition to a historic cliff, long a proving ground for winter climbers. The wall that hosts the climb is beautiful and not well explored. As we like to say in New England, after it cleans up with a little traffic, it could be classic.

— Jon Nicolodi

Images



Foreshortened view of Across the Great Divide (550', 6 pitches, M8 R) on Cannon Cliff, New Hampshire. The Whitney-Gilman Ridge runs along or near the skyline. The Black Dike ice climb is at far right.



Across the Great Divide (550', 6 pitches, M8 R) climbs the ominous wall between the classic Whitney-Gilman Ridge on the left and the Black Dike and Fafnir ice routes on the right.



Jon Nicolodi looking up the route from the pitch two anchor on an early attempt on Across the Great Divide (550', 6 pitches, M8 R), Cannon Cliff, New Hampshire.



Jon Nicolodi looking back from the anchor after climbing the technical M7 traverse of pitch two of Across the Great Divide (550', 6 pitches, M8 R), Cannon Cliff, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire.



Jon Nicolodi climbing the start of the M6+ R fifth pitch of Across the Great Divide (550', 6 pitches, M8 R).



Pat Cooke rejoining the Whitney-Gilman Ridge on the final pitch of Across the Great Divide (550', 6 pitches, M8 R), Cannon Cliff, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire.



Shawn Bunnell checking out the third pitch of Across the Great Divide during an attempt in November 2021.

Article Details

Author	Jon Nicolodi
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	97
Page	172
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions