



## AAC Publications

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### **Chiefs Head, Northeast Face, Spirit Animal**

Colorado, Rocky Mountains, Rocky Mountain National Park

**Given that I'd never stepped foot into Glacier Gorge, you might say my plan to rope-solo a new line up the 1,500' northeast face of Chiefs Head (13,577') was ambitious.** Maybe, but my buddy Greg Davis, who'd established some classics on that alpine wall—including Ten Little Indians (IV 5.11a) and Cowboys and Indians (IV 5.11c)—about 30 years earlier, assured me there were still plums to be picked, and spoke of an amazing, untapped upper headwall. My only question was, *Why hadn't these climbs been done before?*

When I made it out there, in mid-August 2022, some of the answers became clear. Just getting to the base of Chiefs Head's northeast face requires an hour's hike past Spearhead, which is already deep into Glacier Gorge, six miles from the road. The final approach involves either snow travel (early season) or horribly loose scree (late season)—apparently refreshed with razor-sharp rocks daily. Traversing to the wall's midsection, where most of the potential lay, required balancing along a snowfield moat—no easy task for a Southerner allergic to snow. But after considerable effort stomping steps into the snow and multiple trips with supplies, all without a belay, I managed to assemble a small mountain of gear at the base of the cliff. I was exhausted, but also psyched to tackle some of the most pristine granite I'd ever seen, stretching to the skyline.

I'd spent decades rope-soloing new routes, both big and small, in the mountains of North Carolina. There was a certain solace in being out there all alone, with only my dogs as witness, scrapping up something that most could have cared less about. Since I moved to Colorado, six years ago, this is something I'd missed. Most of my work had been on smaller crags, so I was ready for some "real climbing" again. Unfortunately, Chiefs Head's sheer size, plus the requisite hand-drilled bolting inside the national park, would make things more "real" than I'd become accustomed to in recent years.

Greg had given me a photo with possible lines drawn in, but his topo didn't do this wall justice. There were amazing cracks and corners everywhere. To me, the most obvious line started up a left-arching series of corners with a small ledge at 90'. After some shenanigans sorting out a ground anchor, the pitch went off without a hitch. Unfortunately, the second pitch was soaked from the previous day's rain, so I used the extra time to work out an excellent 5.11 variation to pitch one that I would bolt during inclement weather on a subsequent trip—this would become a common theme up along the Continental Divide.

When I returned to climb pitch two, it was wet yet again. The slimy lichen made the rock so slick that aiding was the only option, though later, once dry and with a few added bolts, it became one of the route's best pitches—a beautiful finger crack and roof traverse, all going at 5.10+/11-.

It's hard to remember exactly how many trips I made that season. Suffice it to say, the pitches that followed required days of effort. Pitch three led up easy corners to large, ominous overhangs, where a spike of rock fortunately allowed passage. From a cramped belay above the roof, the remaining 1,000' slab/headwall came into view.

I finally pulled out the drill on pitch four. It'd been some time since I'd hand-drilled on lead, but after a few minutes I was tapping away. The first one went in quickly with the aid of a funky Pecker—driven upward into a semi-hollow body-weight flake. No stress—there was nothing to hit this high up if it blew anyway. A naturally protected section followed, leading to a bulge and slab where I placed a few

more bolts, mostly from good stances. This tricky, water-sculpted face was finished during the following trip; it ends on the ledge where pitch four of Ten Little Indians crosses.

The next section had been a big question mark in my discussions with Greg. After some shenanigans, I sussed out a line up the slab to the right of Ten Little Indians. After a considerable amount of hand-drilling (six bolts total), this became a sweet 5.10 face pitch.

Pitch six started with a cruxy water streak and finished up what some have dubbed the “Lost at Sea” pitch—an overhanging, bushy crack that’s an unintended variation to Cowboys and Indians’ seventh pitch, where many get lost. My version makes a beeline to a spacious, grassy ledge, which provided a nice bivy the following summer.

In 2023, the weather and conditions weren’t good enough for me to return until late August. After a long day regaining my high point, I was exhausted. There was still a lot of new ground to cover, including the still-unclimbed headwall above Long Ledge, where all previous routes had veered right around a roof. I considered just gunning for the summit the following day on Cowboys and Indians. Torn, I slept on it.

That night, my only companion on the grassy ledge was an unusually large rat, who seemed a little too interested in my anchor; it gave up trying to chew through my tether only after I doused him with a few squirts of precious water. I awoke tired but seeing the route in a whole new light. The fabulous, knob-riddled “Golden Are te,” my seventh pitch, glowed in the morning sun, shooting straight up to Long Ledge. By afternoon, the bolting was done. I was out of time, though, so down I went, again.

The last push was in early September. So far, I’d been approaching from the bottom, but the climbing season up there would end very soon, so I decided to come in from the top for the final pitches. To my surprise, the exposed headwall, while having a few scary flakes, wasn’t bad—it went at 5.11 on bolts and gear.

Greg had flippantly pointed to an “easy crack” in a photo to finish the route—a feature that ended up being a pinched-off, dead-end seam. However, Greg’s “crack” did lead me to discover a double finger and hand crack slashing diagonally across the face to the last few feet of knobby rock. A couple more bolts and the route was complete.

Was all that work worth it? Several times I felt I’d reached the end—a figurative one, as the literal end still loomed far overhead. But I just kept going, cajoled by Greg every time we’d meet at a crag, until finally Spirit Animal (10 pitches, 5.11) was done. After the memories of hellish, gear-laden approaches had faded, only the vital essence of the ascent remained: getting after it high on that massive wall with only my spirit animal there to watch. It was just like old times.

— Nathan Brown

**2024 Update:** After completing the first ascent of Spirit Animal in September 2023, Brown still had not redpointed every pitch in a continuous ascent. In mid-July 2024, he returned to Chiefs Head and freed the full route over two days, with a bivouac at the top of pitch six. He rope-soloed the entire route.

### **Spirit Animal, Northeast Face of Chiefs Head, Route Description**

**Note:** This route description, with a few additional photos, can be downloaded as a PDF [here](#).

P1: Climb the obvious left-arching crack system(s) for about 90’ to a good ledge and belay. There are currently fixed stainless-steel Stoppers and a jammed knot for an anchor. Plenty of other options

exist in the finger size. 5.9+? Gear: Standard rack up to number 3 Camalot.

Variation P1: Climb the impeccable white face left of the normal start. Gear and two pins protect the lower portion. Continue up the excellent, thin sickle-shaped flake on Stoppers and small cams. Step left to a stance at the top of the flake (crux) then up the thin face on good edges, protected by three bolts. These bolts are well-spaced. Ends straight up at the normal belay ledge. 5.11b/c? Ten out of five stars!!!

P2: Climb the obvious corner finger crack a ways up to a traverse right under the roof. There is a bolt here. Clip it and make the traverse using some weird jams on flared cracks (the rock is a little hollow in spots here). Be sure to sling gear (not the bolt) before and after the traverse to keep the rope straight and off the (semi) sharp edges! Continue traversing right and up a short corner, then yet another traverse along a flat rail protected by two bolts. (Avoid going up to the dirty, wet roof—the original (aid) line, which was abandoned in favor of better/cleaner rock below). The crux (10+/11-?) comes at the end. Belay at bolts on the nice ledge.

P3—“The Corners Pitch.” Climb up an easy corner, via hollow flakes, then step left onto a sloping ledge below the leftmost of several corners. Follow this up to its top and yet another corner. Climb it to a large, narrow ledge and traverse right past the “dripping spot.” Climb out the right side of this corner/roof and onto a large spike of rock. Then mantel up to gain the sickle-shaped crack/flake and belay on gear. This belay is a bit awkward, as the cams (hand size and bigger) are at knee level and off to the side. 5.8 or 5.9? Gear: Standard rack, but save hand- and fist-sized cams for the belay. Lots of slings to reduce drag on the traverses.

P4: Climb the middle of the “flake”-shaped formation that forms the corner of Ten Little Indians’ pitch four. Continue up the flake a few feet, then move up to a bolt. Step left to gain a weakness of sorts (good number 1 Camalot slot here) and continue up past a couple more pieces to easier terrain. Continue straight up to a bulge protected by bolts (crux). From a ledge above, climb past one more bolt (the 5th) and gear to the ledge where Ten Little Indians crosses. 5.10+? Gear: Standard rack and five bolts.

P5: Climb the short right-facing flake (rightmost one) on gear to the pristine slab protected by bolts. The slab section requires some meandering to find the best holds, but the rope line is more or less straight up. There is a short corner at the end, which is protected by a hand/fist-sized cam or two, and leads to a small ledge and a semi-hanging belay on bolts. 5.10. Gear: Light rack and approx. six bolts.

P6: This pitch can be a little wet at times. Climb the brown streak past a bolt (placed after the FA) to an incipient crack and a few small Stoppers (number 2 or 3?). This soon eases as it hits a short flake. Easy runout gets you to a face with good holds and three more bolts (the original route zigzagged a bit and lacked the last bolt, but the final version is much more direct and safer). Follow the steep veggie crack (cleaned out but will still be vegetated) to a ledge and belay on gear. Note: The crack portion of this pitch has been done numerous times by parties trying to navigate the “Lost at Sea” pitch of Cowboys and Indians. 5.11. Gear: Full rack up to number camalot and five bolts.

P7: “The Golden Arête.” One could start this from the small alcove belay directly above the crack of pitch six, but the FA was done from the left-facing dihedral just around the corner to the left. This is a better-flowing line (and bivy spot, as used on the FA). Climb easy flakes past gear to gain the arête. Climb the Golden Arête on five bolts to a good stance. From here, either climb the arête or stem the corner. Either way, protect this with cams in the cracks out near the arête. Merge into the last 5.8 section of Cowboys and Indians and follow it to Long Ledge. 5.10? Gear: Medium-sized rack and five bolts.

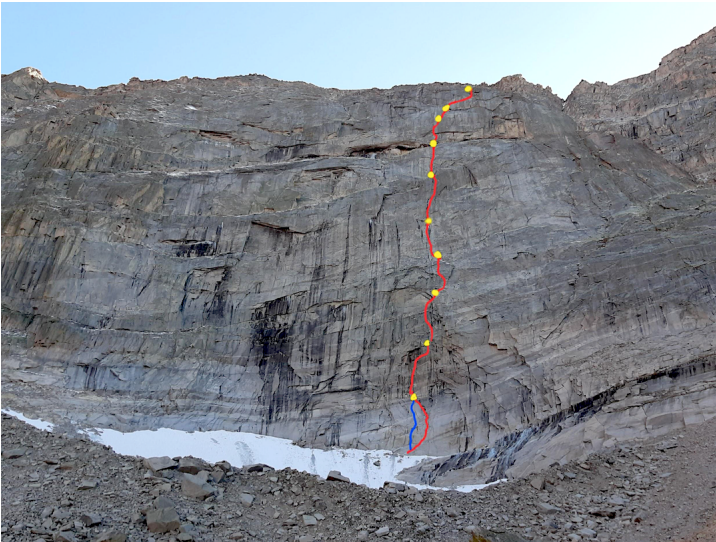
P8: “The Headwall Pitch”: This pitch is much more reasonable than one would expect, given how steep it looks. Clip a reachy bolt above a shallow corner. Pull a boulder problem (11b/c) on sidepulls to reach good holds leading up and left to flakes. Follow these hollow flakes (a little spooky, but

there's good gear) to the roof. Save some long runners for below the roof. Climb the small roofs on bolts (three more) to crack systems leading up and right. Follow these to one of several ledges and belay on gear. 5.11. Gear: Up to hand-sized cams and some long slings.

P9: Not really a pitch and could be combined with pitch ten. Climb up and right along easy corners and seams to the base of pitch ten. 5.8? Gear: Light rack, with a few small pieces in the seam.

P10: Follow the amazing double cracks that bisect the otherwise blank face. At the end, two bolts protect a short section of knobby face climbing that gains the "Hanging Gardens" section of the alt. finish to Cowboys and Indians. 5.9?

## Images



Foreshortened view of the northeast face of Chiefs Head, showing the line of Spirit Animal, including the first pitch variation (5.11) in blue. The stepped left-facing corner of Cowboys and Indians can be seen to the right.



The first two pitches of Spirit Animal as seen from the slab/glacier approach. Variation pitch one (5.11) in blue.



The line of Spirit Animal (10 pitches, 5.11) on the northeast face of Chiefs Head (13,577'), with the summit in back. Other routes on the face are not shown.

## Article Details

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