



AAC Publications

Snowpatch Spire, East Face, Attachment Theory

Canada, British Columbia, Purcell Mountains, Bugaboos

This is a story of perseverance, creativity, and joy that began in 2017 and finished seven years later.

The east face of Snowpatch Spire in the Bugaboos has inspired me and many other avid climbers who stay at the Applebee Campground and are fascinated by its enchanting, flawless granitic features. A clean, banana-shaped crack halfway up the east face, directly under the south summit, had caught my eye and heart. Scouring the face, I started linking the features to the bottom of the wall. Over the years, my work and studies were two of the many barriers to establishing a new route during the short Canadian alpine climbing season, along with adverse weather or conditions, and difficulty finding the right partners.

Pre-childbearing, Carla Demyen, a mountain guide from Golden, was the first brave soul to join me in exploring this route in 2017. We began about 30m to the left of the Beckey-Mather (1959); the eventual route we climbed is now the farthest left on the face before you get to the peak's namesake snowpatch. The first 60m can be done in two or three pitches and has one short crux of 5.11+ on the second pitch, which we dubbed "the Microdose." This pitch seems slow to dry, and we managed to climb it in very wet conditions—it's amazing what motivated climbers can do!

The next couple of attempts were made with Timothy McAllister, a mountain guide from Invermere, in 2017 and 2018. We climbed up to the banana crack, which we named "Anxious Attachment," pitch six on the wall. We were excited by the quality of the climbing and the minimal cleaning required, and we couldn't wait to unlock the line through the looming roofs above.

Tim had been enthusiastic about finishing the route with me, but after a couple of summers of waiting, I started inviting others to help me. In 2022, Katy Holm, a powerhouse climber and entrepreneur from Squamish, said yes. I couldn't be happier, as many of my best climbing partners had become mothers and were no longer into big alpine rock adventures.

Katy and I quickly made it up past pitch six, after a couple of days of setting fixed lines on the lower pitches. Pitch seven, "Avoidant Attachment," required a lot of cleaning. We started to get impatient with the process and intimidated by what appeared to be a lack of protection in a seam below big, gaping roof cracks. Katy encouraged me to pendulum off the line and try another crack system to the left. We continued up beside the spire's huge snowpatch for a few pitches until the rock quality deteriorated, then bailed across the steep snow and down the Snowpatch Route, systematically donating our rack in the retreat.

My full schedule as a nursing student did not allow me to return to the Bugaboos that summer or fall, and I didn't want to leave our fixed ropes in place for the winter. In August, I contacted the talented Stephen Senecal, a ski guide from Nelson, to ask if he would help me retrieve the fixed lines and to see if he wanted to help me finish the route. He excitedly agreed and, partnered with Stefan Sander-Green, established the final nine pitches to the top of the mountain. Luckily for me, they didn't climb it all clean, so I still had the opportunity to participate in the first free ascent.

In 2023, Stephen and I established bolted rappel anchors for the first nine pitches to the roof. Then, in 2024, after Stephen had completed his ACMG apprentice alpine exam, we set aside a few days to attempt the free ascent.

Before dawn on September 7, we creatively established a T-slot anchor using wooden CMH heli-ski stakes and lowered out across the wide moat at the base of the wall. We were relieved to get onto the wall without incident and now we just had to send!

I led the first crux and Stephen the next two—we were cheering each other on. We both had to dig deep to free climb the intimidating roof of pitch nine (I seconded clean). We called this pitch “Ghosted” (5.11+), as we did not send it on earlier visits. We are not sure it’s more difficult than pitch two, but it’s an endurance crux and needs long slings to prevent rope drag: hand and fist jamming under a roof to a mantel, followed by a bouldery sequence to a final layback and a tricky step-across to the anchor. I was surprised by my success and incredibly grateful that all my hard work had come to fruition.

We continued upward, generally trending leftward for five more pitches on easier terrain, to where we could step left and join the Honeymooners Variation on the Snowpatch Route (Arnold-Bedayn, 1940) for the last two pitches to the summit. I am grateful to Stephen’s supportive wife, Kristen, and friends who accompanied him into the alpine to cheer us on. Thank you to all the people who supported this ascent!

—Jennifer Olson, Canada

Attachment Theory (900m, 16 pitches, 5.11+). East face of Snowpatch Spire. Jen Olson and Stephen Senecal (with help from Stefan Sander-Green, Katy Holm, Tim McAllister, and Carla Demyen).

Pitch zero: out of the moat – This future pitch is too dirty and dangerous to attempt yet, but it won’t be long. Ho’oponopono: I am sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you. This is the future of Attachment Theory. To acknowledge and take responsibility for any negative thoughts, actions, or emotions that may have contributed to conflict or disharmony.

Pitch 1 (50m, 5.11): New relationship energy (NRE): “terrifying and intoxicating.” Can be broken into two pitches. Move left from the belay and up excellent rock and cracks with face features. At the base of the left-facing corner move up and right to under the right side of the roof, then traverse back left to ascend through the roof on the left side (possible belay above the roof with 3”–4” cams). Then step right into thin finger cracks. Up to a narrowing slot then step left back into left facing corner for a few body lengths of double cracks, then up a ramp to the right and a two-bolt anchor. Careful with hauling the pack over the roof.

Pitch 2 (15m, 5.11+): The microdose. Head up and left from the belay to the left-facing corner. Stem and layback up thin climbing. Plug a.75 and enjoy the trip—then up and right behind the tombstone to belay on a ledge and two-bolt anchor. (Will likely add a protection bolt at the crux).

Pitch 3 (45m, 5.11-): Ethically non-monogamous (ENM): “no reason to limit the options.” Climb right into the chimney and up right into the left-facing corner, through the roof, and just before the belay, traverse left and up to a two-bolt anchor. (Ensure your tagline is out of the chimney before hauling).

Pitch 4 (25m, 5.10): Haven of Safety: “responsive and available physically and emotionally.” Initially, this pitch was climbed with a direct start of 5.11 R, but it’s easier to step left from the belay around the arête and up to a ledge; weave following face features and cracks up to a big slung horn. Gear belay. (Might make this a two-bolt anchor in the future. It’s not part of the current rappel route.)

Pitch 5 (25m, 5.10): Secure attachment – life goals: “to feel protected and that you have someone you can rely on.” Step left into splitter hand crack 3”–4” with face features. Belay at a two-bolt anchor. You’re not sure what’s coming, but it keeps giving.

Pitch 6 (25m, 5.10): Anxious attachment: “fear of abandonment” (sweet climbing, fear of it ending).

Originally dubbed the banana crack due to its shape, this was the pitch that allured Jen to this route). Climb up the left-facing corner to the pine tree, step left for a body length, and then regain the corner and gear belay on a small stance before steeper climbing. (Another possible bolted anchor). You could link pitches five and six, but you'd miss a sweet ledge belay.

Pitch 7 (40m, 5.11 R): Avoidant attachment: "fear of engulfment". This stellar stemming and layback corner gets thinner in gear, passing a fixed nut with a carabiner and a pin. (Please leave these in place as it's very useful on rappel as a directional.) Likely will add a protection bolt or two. At the top of the difficulties, move left into double cracks, up and left a couple of times to a possible bivy/nap ledge and a two-bolt anchor.

Pitch 8 (55m, 5.10): Established relationship energy (ERE): "deep friendship and longstanding love." Go straight up, cracks and face climbing trending a bit left toward the left side of the big roof. Make a gear belay about 10m–15m before the roof. Deteriorating rock quality. (Could make a two-bolt belay.)

Pitch 9 (40m, 5.11+): Ghosted: "end of communication, no explanation." Climb up to the roof and then traverse right, jamming hands, and head under the roof to a rightward stem and gain a sloped ledge. Shake and power up to the final big roof crack. Layback roof to step right and two-bolt belay. Rappel here or commit to topping out.

Pitch 10 (50m, 5.8): Up wide crack on lower angle rock, moving up and left through overhang, pass big first ledge to next ledge and gear belay.

Pitch 11 (60m, 5.9): Climb up one crack system right of the obvious farthest left crack system. Just before big ledge belay, climb a short, steep hand crack.

Pitch 12 (40m, 5.10): Blue collar lovin.' At the left end of the big ledge, start climbing up in the right-facing corner to a wider crack with a smaller crack in the back. The angle eases, and eventually exit to the left and then back up and right over loose terrain to find a comfortable belay on a large ledge.

Pitch 13 (40m, 5.7): Follow your nose up above the belay, being careful not to knock off loose rock. Follow a crack/groove up and right, then back left to the arete and a good belay stance on a nice big ledge.

Pitch 14 (55m, 5.7): Move right to a good crack; when it gets wide, traverse back left on small ledges, then up to easier ground and follow cracks up and left and up and left again to a ledge belay below steeper terrain.

Pitch 15 (50m, 5.8): Step left into Honeymooners. Follow a left-facing crack up and right until an alcove on the right.

Pitch 16 (30m, 5.7): Make an airy step right onto the rock fin, then traverse, downclimb, and move across right to follow obvious weakness to the summit ridge.

Pitch 17 (20m): Up to south summit.

Rappel Beckey-Greenwood.

Images



Descending Snowpatch Spire after making the first ascent of Attachment Theory (900m, 5.11+) on the east face of Snowpatch Spire.



Lowering out through the moat below Snowpatch Spire off a buried wooden CMH Heli stake.



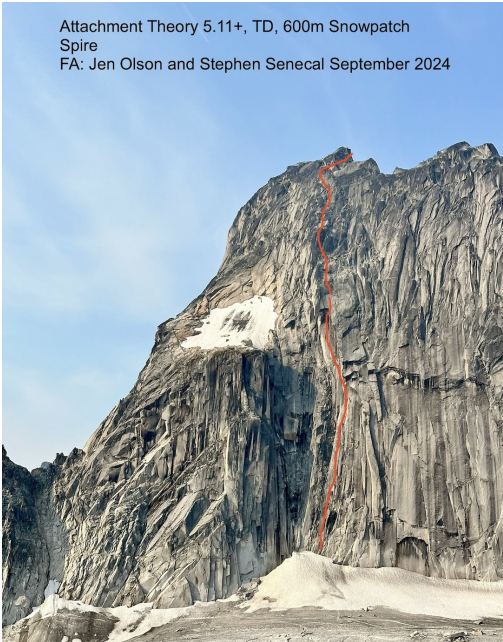
Getting ready to start up Attachment Theory in the morning light.



Jen Olson and Stephen Senecal after making the first ascent of Attachment Theory (900m, 5.11+) on the east face of Snowpatch Spire.



Stephen Senecal on the 5.11c pitch seven of Attachment Theory (900m, 5.11+).



The line of Attachment Theory on the east face of Snowpatch Spire.

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