

north face of north trapper peak (IV, 5.10)

BITTERROOT MOUNTAINS, MONTANA

by John Burbidge

"The approach hike is reputed to be a classic," Rick mentioned at the trailhead. He used the word "classic" with a sly grin. I wondered about his definition; I questioned it even more when thrashing steeply uphill through the thick, stubborn undergrowth above Trapper Creek.

"Doing this route will save us a trip to the Tetons. It's a real classic, just like the North Face of the Grand," Rick had assured me. The

Tetons, that quintessential classic of American ranges, were eight long hours away; North Trapper Peak, in Montana's Bitterroot Mountains, was practically in our backyard. A route on par with the famous North Face of the Grand Teton? I couldn't resist.

"This is a classic bivi," Rick told me that evening, referring, I suppose, to the fact that we hadn't brought a stove and were filling up our water bottles with snow, positioning them around a meager fire and waiting until we had enough water for the next day's climb. We had already ruined two bottles.

"Classic!" Rick shouted the next day as his rope dislodged another shower of loose rocks. He was leading a pitch and, although the climbing was relatively solid, the ledges were not.

"Now that looks classic," Rick said later as we traversed underneath a beautiful, 5.11 granite handcrack first climbed in the early 1980s by Alex Lowe, who frequented the Bitterroots during his college days in Missoula. We continued, however, on the "classic" Thompson Route, first ascended by local legend and world-class mountaineer Gray Thompson, in 1971.

"What a classic crux!" Rick shouted. Only one hand stuck out of the crack that had swallowed him. It clutched a loose-looking monster flake. I attempted the "classic" crux wearing our pack, and



The North Face of Trapper. (The red line follows the Thompson Route; the dotted line traces Alex Lowe's 5.11 handcrack variation.)

soon learned why Rick had insisted on leading.

After two more pitches of tricky 5.10, plus some scrambling, we summited to an incredible view of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness — the largest in the Lower 48. Rock, broken and beautiful, punctuated with canyons and lake-filled basins, surrounded this seldom-visited peak, which has no non-technical route.

"Even the descent is classic," Rick said as we picked our way, ropeless, down an extremely scary, exposed gully.

Back at the car, Rick asked me what I thought of the climb. I shrugged and said it was fun. Is the route a classic on par with the famous North Face of the Grand Teton? Well, I don't know about that....

Rick eyed me suspiciously. "Have you ever done the North Face of the Grand?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"Well, I have," he said. "It's a classic. But it sucks."

where and when Summer is the only sane option. In Missoula, go to the National Forest Service office (200 E. Broadway; 406-329-3510), and purchase a forest service map to the Bitterroot Mountains (\$4 but somewhat unreliable). Drive south 60 miles on US Highway 93 to Darby. Three-and-a-half miles south of Darby, go right on the West Fork Road and (just past the

Trapper Creek Work Center), turn right onto the Lavene Creek Road and take it five miles to the trailhead. You can camp at the Trapper Peak trailhead.

Hike a mile up the left side of the creek to where the trail crosses the creek; in a mile, it crosses back, right to left. Just before the trail crosses a third time, cut left (south) up indistinct boulderfields. (For perspective, hike up the north side of the Trapper Creek canyon to survey the slope you will be climbing, view the North Face and find the correct hanging

valley to hike up, which is crucial.) Battle up this slope for about 2,000 vertical feet. Go up a narrow, hanging, steep-sided valley. This opens up into the cirque below the North Face. Bivi at a flat spot near some trees, where the green grass ends, slightly northwest of the face. There are snowfields nearby for water.

There is no route topo in print; follow the red line in the picture. The upper part of the route ascends a very prominent dihedral system. To descend, traverse southwest along a knife-edge ridge toward the main Trapper Peak. Just before the lowest point of this ridge, descend northwest (to your right) down a gully, then drop north (right again) over a small saddle, to reach the base of the climb.

gear and guides A standard rack of cams and nuts will suffice. Consider double ropes — the climb winds around. There are climbing stores in tiny downtown Hamilton, 15 miles north of Darby, but this is the only published guide to the North Face. Bring a stove to melt snow. Bring your helmet and wear it. And bring extra slings for possible rappels on the descent. No bolting is allowed. This is an adventure route in an isolated environment, so be careful. And no matter what happens, remember: It's a classic. You've saved yourself a trip to the Tetons. You are having fun. ▲

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