

WHEN GOD CREATED ROCK CLIMBING

in the western United States, He must have felt mischievous by the time Montana came around. First, with a wide sweep of an arm, He filled the canyons and encrusted the mountains with rubble. Then winking a celestial eye, God carefully tucked a handful of rock gems into the chossy folds.

"I command that Montana's climbing treasures shall remain hidden, disguised in Big Choss, to all but the most adventurous," He thundered.

"Ye who reveal their whereabouts to the lazy, undeserving public shall be damned!" The pronouncement was followed by an almighty quiet.

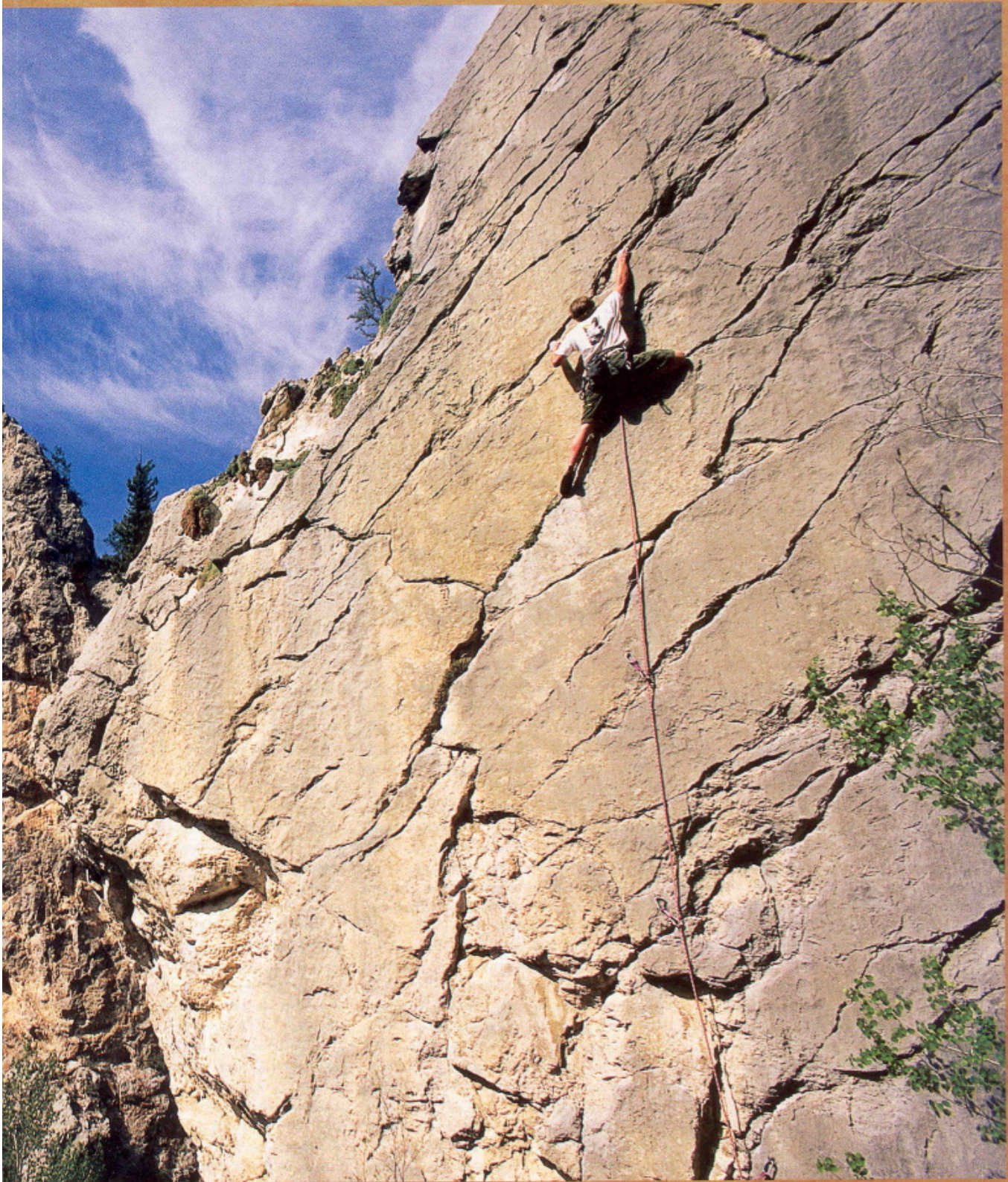
I hope there's good climbing in Hell, because I'm about to break the First Commandment of Montana rock climbing. The Revelation is upon us.

FOREARM FLAMBE (5.10b) IS A SOLID ROCK
GEM SUNK IN A SEA OF BEAVER CREEK CHOSS.

MoNTaNa!

BIG CHOSS



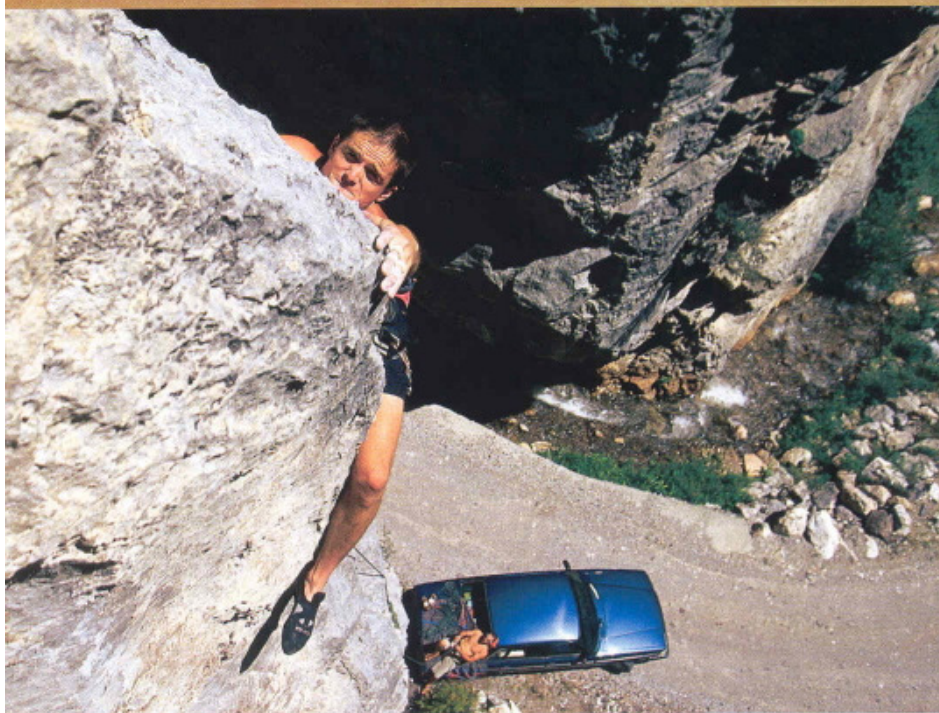


STEWART M. GREEN

COUNTRY



WHEN APPREHENDED, THE ROCK-TRUNDLING



ALEX TKACH HOPES HE WON'T REACH THE TOP OF ROAD SHOW (5.10+) TO FIND THAT N.R.A. ENTHUSIASTS HAVE BLASTED AWAY THE ANCHOR BOLTS. CIRCUS WALL, HELLGATE GULCH.

as good a granite slab as you'll find anywhere — well worth the one-hour approach.

Be forewarned. Mill Creek has a few hazards: Ticks and hicks. On a spring day, the former can chase you out of the canyon. The hicks, however, don't disappear when the weather gets warm. Members of a fringe-religious community living near Mill Creek's trailhead once rained boulders down on a small group of climbers from 1,000 feet up, keeping them trapped for hours and causing the climbers' dog to charge off a 100-foot cliff. (The dog lived.) When apprehended, the perpetrators said they were unaware that climbers had been below, and denied yelling, "Die, hippies!" Ultimately, the climbers refused to press charges and the bombers got off with a public apology.

Try your luck on Neutered Rooster, Hooligans, Kicking Gravel and Chickenhoist, all superb 165-foot, 5.10 and 5.11 bolted face routes. For a longer (and looser) alpine experience located nearby, get set for No Sweat Arête (III 5.9). A legend was born years ago on this dicey climb when the late Alex Lowe tried to free solo the route with his arm in a cast. The story goes that Lowe fell off the crux pitch, broke an ankle on a ledge hundreds of feet off the deck and then finished the climb.

True or not, Alex Lowe left his mark all over Montana's mountains. A native of the state, his energy embodied this wild place. Lowe will be greatly missed by Montana climbers.

BIG CREEK CANYON

Big Creek boasts a number of excellent vertical sport climbs in a wonderful setting. The rock is some of the finest you'll encounter in the Bitterroot Mountains: solid with awesome, positive edges. Set high on a shoulder overlooking Big Creek Canyon, the crags offer breathtaking views of the expansive Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness to the west. There's no reason to recommend one route over another — climbers who like 5.9 to 5.11 can do all 20 of 'em in a day and have a blast. No guidebook exists to this area, so stop in at Pipestone Mountaineering or The Trailhead (both in Missoula) to get beta and directions to the cliffs.

KOOTENAI CANYON

Overhanging and full of jugs, Kootenai Canyon is my favorite spot for hard sport routes in Montana. At its best, Kootenai requires a mix of

I'VE lived in The Big Sky State for 18 years, 14 of which I've spent climbing, and I know a few things. One thing I believe is that the "Keep-Montana-a-secret-or-it's-gonna-get-crowded!" chant perpetuated by suspicious locals is just plain, misguided dogma. If Montana can maintain the proud distinction of having the lowest average income in the US, not to mention the highest concentration of Unabomber-types living in the woods, few people will ever entertain serious thoughts of establishing roots here. Second, most climbers touring the West will always deem Montana a little too far out of the way because, let's face it, it is.

For those willing to make the pilgrimage, though, I say welcome. Come to Montana and climb. On any given day, you'll have the state's select crags to yourself. There's not too many places like that left in the industrialized world. Experience the solitude and wildness of this vast land, and, with this treasure map as a guide, take a piece home in your heart.

BLODGETT CANYON

"Sierra-esque," remarked climbing photographer Gordon Wiltsie, and he's right. Blodgett Canyon is a little slice of the High Sierra that found its way to Montana's Bitterroot Mountains. This two-mile-long canyon boasts eight or nine distinct, south-facing buttresses that jut straight up out of the ground, some over 1,000 feet high. The brown, orange and gray granite has an untrammled, alpine feel, and the climb-

ing is world class. The South Face of Shoshone Spire (III 5.8) is one of the best routes of its grade in the country. Four or five pitches of moderate crack climbing lead to a spectacular summit. If you're set on utter solitude, plan a weekday ascent — Shoshone is one of the few routes in Montana that sees "traffic."

Climbers solid at 5.10 should head for the regular route on Flathead Buttress (South Face, IV 5.10d), the crown jewel of Montana. Massive and steep, Flathead is the westernmost formation in the canyon, and positive proof that you don't have to leave the state to get freaked out on a big rock wall. Don't miss the hard aid routes on Flathead, either, if that's what you're into.

The aesthetic Southwest Buttress on Nez Perce Spire (IV 5.10) is another Blodgett classic. It leans toward loose, so wear a helmet. Climbers who want a good 5.11 challenge should tackle Time Binder (IV 5.11b) on the Prow. The wild crux 800 feet up will make you squeal, "Yee-haw, Montanal!" If you don't have much time or the weather looks iffy, head to the Parking Lot Wall for traditionally bolted face routes. Keep in mind that power drills are prohibited in the Bitterroot Mountains. It is vital that climbers adhere to an all-around, low-impact ethic. Future access depends on it!

MILL CREEK CANYON

Mill Creek, one canyon north of Blodgett, offers full-pitch, sustained sport routes. Positive edges and superb rock quality make Mill Creek

HICKS DENIED YELLING, "DIE HIPPIES."

power, endurance and technique to place and clip those gloriously free-hanging quickdraws. Lichen decorates the rock with a full array of organic colors, and the creek that flows beneath the cliff bands transfixes me every time.

You'll find about 15 to 20 three-star sport routes in the canyon, plus a handful of moderate to difficult trad lines. Sport climbers can warm up on 11th Commandment (5.9+) and Flying Time (mega-classic, exposed 5.10+ roof). Uncontrollable Desire (5.11b) is long, challenging and fun, and the B.R.I.K. (5.12b) with 80 feet of overhanging jugs and several tricky cruxes,

is one of the best routes of its grade anywhere. Venus de Milo (5.12a) has a brilliant crux at the top. Right next door, find Venus Fly Trap (5.13a), a thin and overhanging Kootenai testpiece. Cave routes? You bet. Head up to the Sick Bay and get on Clubfoot (5.12a/b) and Smokin' Joe (5.12c/d), super-steep and powerful classics.

Excellent moderate trad routes include The Corner (5.4) and Ironmongers (5.7), both two to three pitches. Pleasant Surprise (5.8), with its exposed roofy finish, will make your heart go pitter patter. The Hardman Wall is, well, hard. Fiddle nuts into Square Root (5.9+) or Cube

Root (5.10c), then get ready to tackle The Dude and Weiner Pigs, both pumpy 5.11 gear battles. And please don't mess with the Indian pictographs nearby. Instead, revel in the fact that ancient people saw the same beauty and sanctuary in these cliffs that we do today.

Although replete with a 30-year climbing history, be aware that Kootenai climbs are on private land. Future access is not guaranteed and selected areas are closed for the time being. As a user group, climbers should set an example by being conscientious stewards of the area. Observe a Leave No Trace ethic; don't shortcut trails and only climb existing routes. Hopefully, these cliffs will some day become a part of the public domain.

RATTLER AND MULKEY GULCHES

Much of the Madison limestone that runs through the heart of the state won't tolerate route development. Uncleanable, the rock layers peel off until nothing's left. In select areas, however, the rock holds together, resulting in low-angle, sharp-as-shit climbs with names like Shredder (spooky 5.10b; don't fall!).

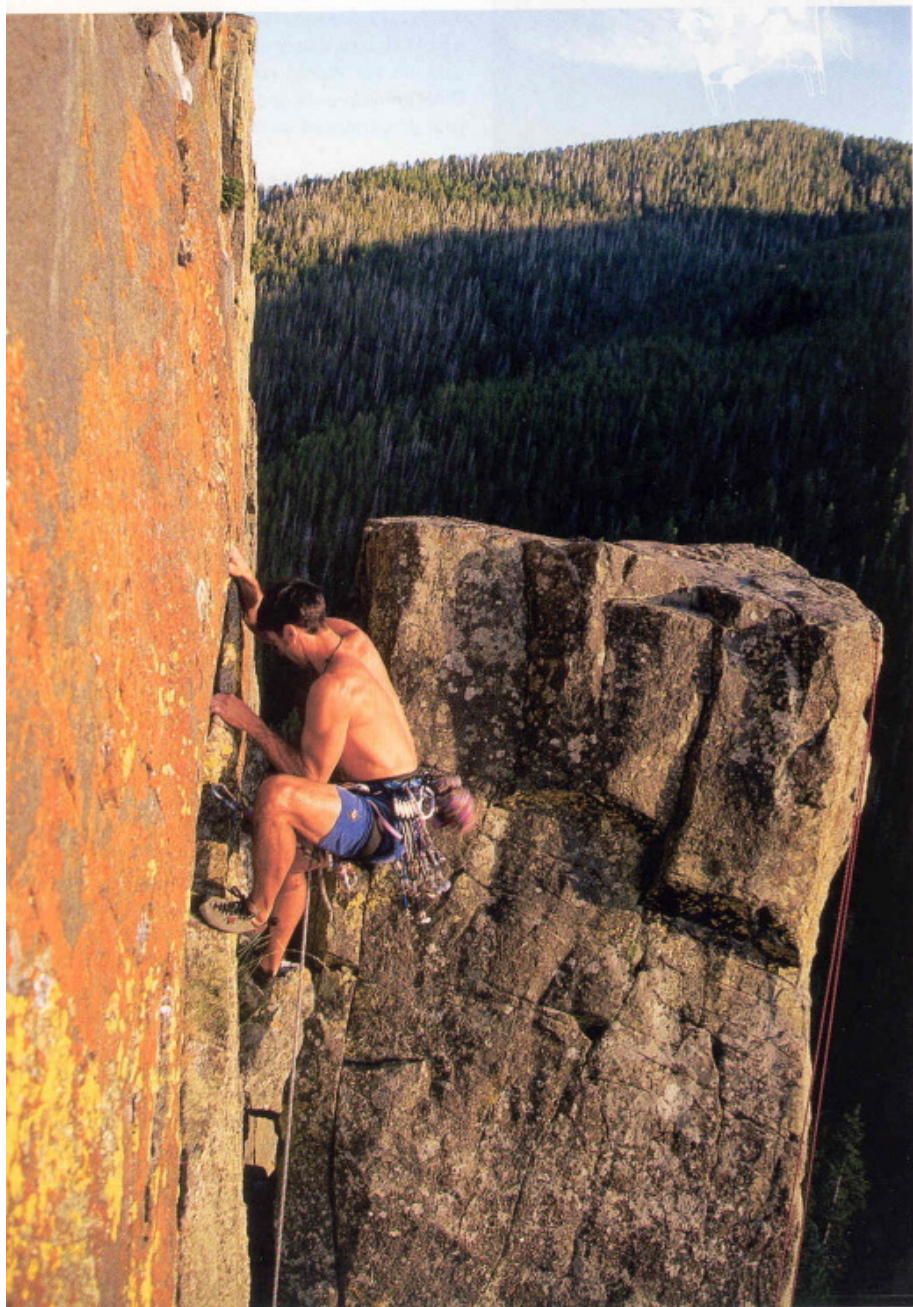
A wonderful exception to this sharp, low-angle rule is The Diver's Wall at Rattler Gulch. Slammed right into the ground like a giant hatchet blade, this vertical playground is speckled with pockets and edges. The 80-foot routes are sustained, technical and fun. Warm up on The Cannon (5.11b), then jump on Gumby Killer (5.12a) or Me and the Devil (5.12b). True sickos will want to give Damage (5.12d/13a) a shot.

If you like slabs, head west to Mulkey Gulch and visit The Mulkey Man Area or the Skidmark Wall. For something a tad steeper, try Crimper for Christ (5.12 chert knobs; don't pull them off!) and Masters at Arms (insanely thin 5.13 face climbing) just west of Mulkey Man. Left of Crimpers for Christ are several other decent sport routes, thin 5.11 and 5.12 face climbs that are barbed and humbling.

THE LOLO DOMES

If you're driving to or from Missoula on Highway 12, check out these interesting granite blobs scattered throughout the woods on the Montana-Idaho border. The Lochsa River, just over the border in Idaho, is a world-famous white-water run, so the Lolo Domes make a good

PRACTICE — OR THE REAL THING? ROB HAGLER CRUISES A TRIP THROUGH PARADISE (5.11), PRACTICE ROCK, HYALITE CANYON.



SONIA BURCARD

choice for a combination climbing-paddling trip. Pick a campground or grab a cheap, cozy cabin at the Lochsa Lodge and hit the primitive hot springs. This is beautiful country despite several pockets of heavy logging activity. Wildlife is plentiful — especially on the road at night.

Find the most popular rocks on the Montana side. Tor Rock, Elk Rock, Bonsai Rock and Crystal Theater have numerous good sport and trad routes of all grades. Hard routes are extremely technical; don't expect jugs on these domes. One exception is Cappuccino Cowboy (5.12b) an overhanging clip-up on That Rock.

Interestingly, the first onsight ascent of Cappuccino Cowboy was done six or seven years ago by Dean Potter, now a well-recognized, Yosemite speed soloist. Potter spent a short stint in Montana in the early '90s, living underneath my kitchen table in Missoula for a few months while he trained for his first winter at Hueco Tanks. He did hundreds of pull-ups a day, ate nothing but cornflakes and onsighted numerous testpieces in the Missoula area. Locals weren't jealous, just amazed.

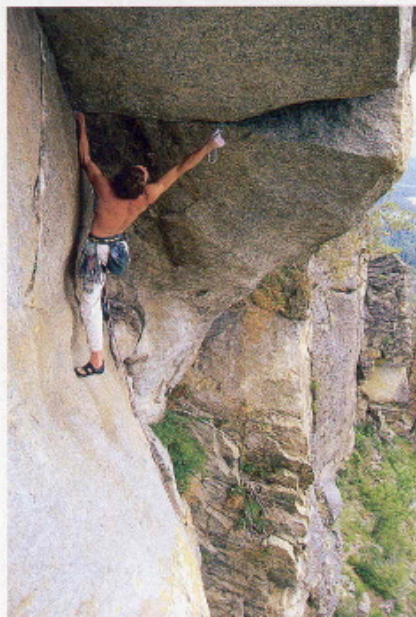
HELLGATE GULCH

Oh no! More broken, Madison-belt limestone? Not so fast. While it's true that Hellgate is loose and sharp, it's also a first-class sport climbing area for people who fancy themselves proficient at thin, technical edging. This place will destroy your tips (and your ego) like nowhere else.

Don't visit Hellgate unless you enjoy getting slapped around by 5.10 to 5.12. Lea's Route (5.6) is one of the canyon's only moderates, and shouldn't be underestimated. The monstrous roof on Devil's Highway (5.10a) has been bolted but never climbed; try your luck at posterity. Canyon Fairy (5.11b) gives good face climbing and Benevolence (5.11c) lives up to its sandbag reputation. Get on Learning to Fly (5.12a) and learn the hard way.

Stop by The Base Camp in Helena for a beta sheet to Hellgate routes — no guidebook exists. Be aware that some routes require nuts and small cams to supplement bolts. And beware of rednecks who use bolts as target practice. My partners and I had bullets whiz over our heads last spring as we sat on a ledge swapping draws for the next route. Who says sport climbing isn't dangerous?

Beaver Creek and Trout Creek canyons are nearby, with massive walls of stupendous choss rising everywhere in every direction. Think adventure climbing, a mini El Potrero Chico prone to lots more rockfall, if you can believe that. In Beaver Creek, get on the three-pitch This Ain't Nuthin' (5.12a) to find out it's somethin'. In Trout Creek, the Whirling Wall is four pitches of fun 5.10+.



"NOW I CLIMB THIS ROUTE SO STEEP, I PRAY THE LORD MY SOUL TO KEEP. IF I PULL AND CHERT KNOBS BREAK, I PRAY THE LORD MY SOUL TO TAKE." CRIMPER FOR CHRIST (5.12a), MULKEY GULCH. ABOVE: IAN SPENCER-GREEN SPARS WITH A MONTANA ROOF CRACK ON DICKIE GETS IT DONE (5.11d), BIG CREEK.

HUMBUG SPIRES

If you're in Montana, do NOT miss the Humbugs. White granite spires poke out of the pine trees like giant teeth, beckoning climbers on Interstate 15 from several miles away. Many more rocks are hidden back in the hills, and the potential for exploration is incredible. Routes have been established on the myriad formations by a few cognizant locals and visitors, but more often than not, there's no trace of passage. Let's keep it this way. Power drills are prohibited in this officially designated Primitive Area.

An easy, four-mile walk will lead you to The Wedge, a 600-foot edifice towering over a remote valley. Routes three to five pitches long climb solid crack systems, followed by bolted faces sprinkled with dishes and chickenheads. Difficulty on The Wedge ranges from 5.6 to 5.11. Other formations abound in the Humbugs, so take your pick and start climbing.

BOZEMAN PASS

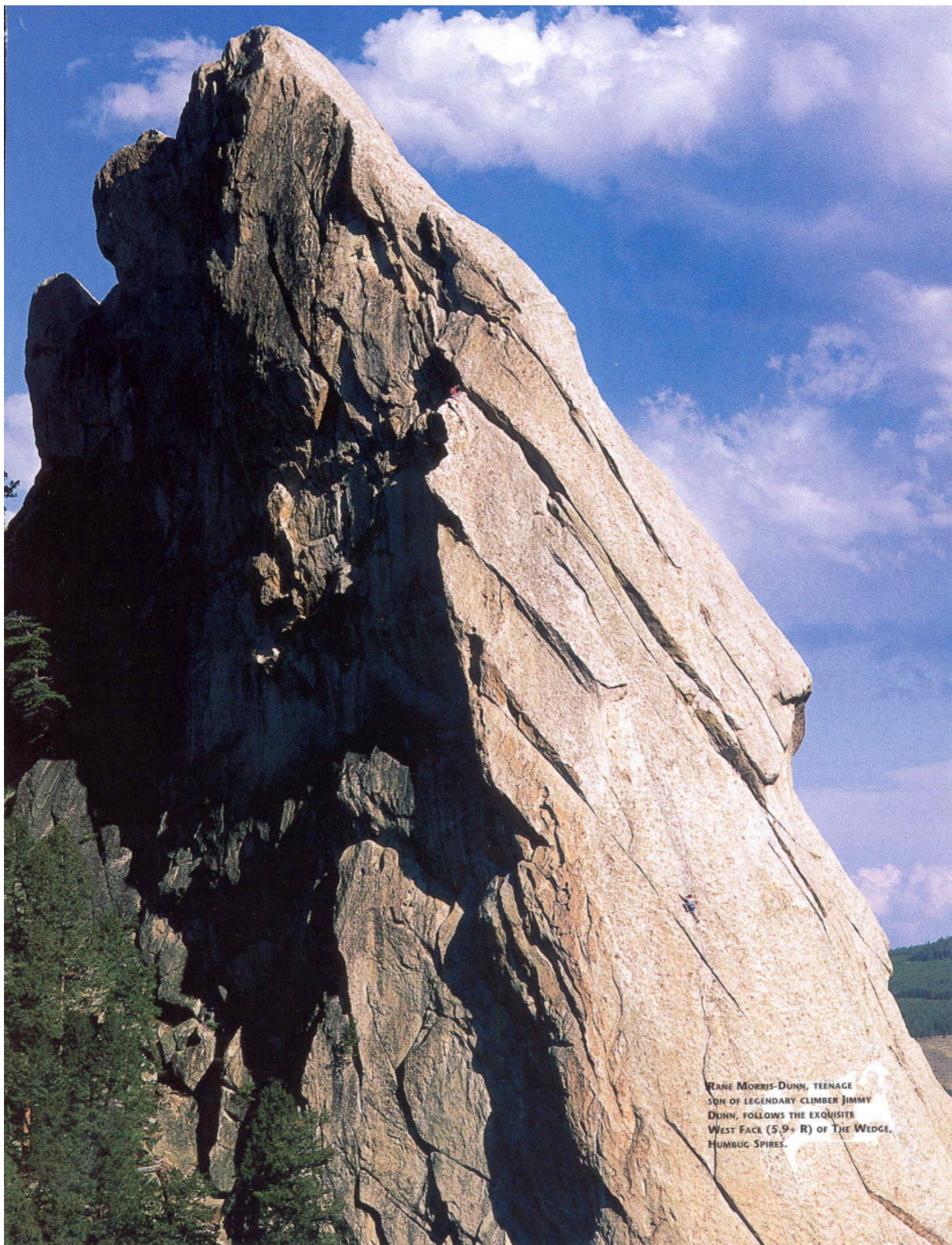
Superb, solid, steep. Fingery, powerful, outstanding. Bozeman Pass has three-star sport routes that shouldn't be missed. OK, there's only a couple dozen routes to choose from, but what the Pass lacks in quantity, it makes up for in quality.

If you don't mind bat guano, feast your eyes on the Pass's hideously interesting limestone cave, just north of Interstate 90 near the sport routes. The walls are alive with jugs, pockets, holds of all sorts — and bat crap, which is why there's only two established routes here. While others have stayed clear of the 10-foot-tall piles of bat goo, the imperturbable Alex Lowe bolted a wild-looking line right through the middle of the mess. Somebody else snaked a route up the far left, but neither sees any traffic. Like most, I'm in favor of leaving the bats alone. But occasionally I crave the cave — it's a true geologic anomaly in Montana.

GALLATIN AND HYALITE CANYONS

One reason Bozeman, Montana's sixth largest city (pop. 29,000), has a growing number of superb extreme climbers is Hyalite Canyon, best known for its top-quality, mixed ice and rock routes. Saner folks climb Hyalite's rock during the summer, leading and top-roping faces and cracks on a formation called Practice Rock. Despite the dispiriting name, most of the routes are uniquely fun and solid.

Another beautiful Bozeman-area canyon is Gallatin. Filled with more climbable rock than its cousin Hyalite, Gallatin features three-to-four-pitch classics, including The Standard (5.8) on Gallatin Tower. Skyline (5.8) is another timeless moderate classic, and Diesel Driver (5.9+) is



RANE MORRIS-DUNN, TEENAGE SON OF LEGENDARY CLIMBER JIMMY DUNN, FOLLOWS THE EXQUISITE WEST FACE (5.9+ R) OF THE WEDGE, HUMBUG SPIRES.



thought by some to be one of the best crack climbs in Montana. The list goes on. Tigger and First Best, both 5.10a, are must-dos, and Soft in the Middle (5.11b) is a superb, mostly bolted route requiring a few key gear placements. Want a desperate thin crack route that's on most Bozeman climber's tick lists? Try stuffing your sausages into The Fugitive (5.12b). Oh, and bring your fly rod to these canyons, because the trout fishing on the Gallatin and Madison rivers is world famous.

LAKE KOOCANUSA (STONE HILL)

En route to the Canadian Rockies? Lake Koocanusa near the Canadian border will entertain passers-through with bolted edgy face climbing on quartzite cliffs above the huge reservoir. Close to the road, The Hold Up Bluffs offer easy access to classics such as Beer and Smear (5.8), Night Flyer (5.10b), Seaweed Patch (5.10d) and Another Thought (5.11d). For more solitude, seek out the cliffs away from the road. When you're done climbing, jump in the lake.

BIG CHOSS MOUNTAINEERING

There's lots of it. World-class, 5,000-foot sheer faces of spectacular dubious rock abound in northern Montana's Glacier National Park. Some local hardcores have been quietly climbing these crumbly, monstrous walls for years. Long approaches through grizzly-bear country add to the excitement.

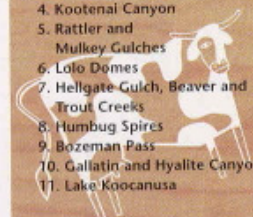
For more straightforward alpine climbing, try the north face of North Trapper Peak in the Bitterroots (5.8 to 5.11 grade IV routes; see R&I #79), or the north face of Granite Peak in the Beartooth Mountains. At 12,799 feet, Granite Peak is Montana's highest summit and a worthy objective by any route. (The East Ridge is considered a "walk up," but a rope is required.) The dizzying rock faces on Mount Cowan, in the Absaroka Range, have been known to cause alpine climbers to froth at the mouth.

In general, the Absarokas and Beartooths southeast of Bozeman hold the most potential for alpine exploration in Montana. That said, the Cabinet Mountains in the far northwest corner of the state are rumored to be John Roskelley's favorite secret alpine training ground.

The potential for technical mountaineering

A STRONG TRADITION OF MINIMUM-IMPACT CLIMBING HAS ALLOWED THE BITTERROOT MOUNTAINS TO RETAIN THEIR WILD FEEL. LOCALS TAKE PRIDE IN LEAVING LITTLE TRACE OF PASSAGE, AND HOPE VISITORS WILL DO THE SAME. HERE, JACK CHILDRESS TRAVERSES THE AIRY FOURTH PITCH OF THE SOUTH FACE OF FLATHEAD BUTTRESS (5.10d).

1. Blodgett Canyon
2. Mill Creek Canyon
3. Big Creek Canyon
4. Kootenai Canyon
5. Rattler and Mulkey Gulches
6. Lolo Domes
7. Hellgate Gulch, Beaver and Trout Creeks
8. Humbug Spires
9. Bozeman Pass
10. Gallatin and Hyalite Canyons
11. Lake Koocanusa



GUIDEBOOKS TO BIG CHOSS COUNTRY

- *The Rock Climber's Guide to Montana*. \$18.95. Published in cooperation with various local guidebook authors, this book covers Blodgett, Mill Creek and Kootenai Canyons, the Lolo Domes, Rattler and Mulkey Gulches, Beaver Creek, Trout Creek, Bozeman Pass, Hyalite and Gallatin Canyons, Lake Koocanusa, the Humbug Spires and other areas not covered in this article. Available at climbing shops nationwide or from Falcon Publishing: 800-582-2665; <www.falcon.com>.
- *Bitterroot Guidebook* by Rick Torre. \$5. Rock climbs in the Bitterroot Mountains. Available at The Trailhead and Pipestone Mountaineering in Missoula, or Chapter One Book Shop in Hamilton.
- *Bozeman Rock Climbs* by Bill Dockins. \$12.95. Thoroughly covers Bozeman areas including Bozeman Pass, Hyalite and Gallatin Canyons. Available at Barrel Mountaineering and Northern Lights Trading Company in Bozeman.
- *Stone Hill: Rock Climbs of Lake Koocanusa* by Greg Stenger. \$12. Available at Rocky Mountain Outfitter in Kalispell.
- *The Climber's Guide to Lolo Pass* by Brad Hutcheson. \$14. Comprehensive coverage of the Lolo Domes. Available at The Trailhead and Pipestone Mountaineering in Missoula.
- *A Climber's Guide to Butte* by Dwight Bishop. \$17. Includes the Humbug Spires and other areas not covered in this article. Available at Pipestone Mountaineering in Butte.
- *Big Sky Ice, 2nd Edition* by Ron Brunkhorst. \$23.50. The best of Montana ice climbing, including recent Hyalite Canyon testpieces. Available at climbing shops nationwide.
- *A Climber's Guide to Glacier National Park* by J. Gordon Edwards. \$12.95. Available at climbing shops nationwide.

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CLIMBING SHOPS

- **Barrel Mountaineering**, 240 E. Main Street, Bozeman, MT 59715. 406-582-1335.
- **The Base Camp**, 333 N. Last Chance Gulch, Helena, MT 59601. 406-443-5360.
- **Northern Lights Trading Company**, 1716 W. Babcock, Bozeman, MT 59715. 406-586-2225.
- **Patagonia® Outlet**, 34 N. Idaho, Dillon, MT 59725. 406-683-2580. If you're coming from Salt Lake City, stop here for great deals!
- **Pipestone Mountaineering**. Two locations: 101 South Higgins, Missoula, MT 59801. 406-721-1670; and 829 S. Montana, Butte, MT 59701. 406-782-4994.
- **Rocky Mountain Outfitter**, 135 Main, Kalispell, MT 59901. 406-752-2446.
- **The Trailhead**, 110 East Pine, Missoula, MT 59802. 406-543-6966.

in these ranges has barely been tapped. Much of it is in designated wilderness areas, where power drills are prohibited. Other than that mild limitation, climbers are free to pick a wall, any wall, and go for it. This is Montana, and ain't nobody gonna stop you.

AND there you have it — the heavenly gates to the Big Sky State have been opened, Montana's First Commandment of rock climbing has been broken and its secrets have been revealed.

Or have they? I bet God tucked many more diamonds into the Big Choss than are revealed here, little riches in the rough untouched by

human hands. Comb the rubbled reaches of this state and you might find clean volcanic columns rising from the prairies, solid limestone looming above remote river gorges or virgin granite spires festooning unexplored mountain ranges. If I'm lucky, another Montanan will risk damnation to write that article — I'll need a partner, after all, to climb the hottest routes in the underworld.

John Burbidge, a former R&I intern, currently edits books and lives in Montana. His story, "The Zombic Traverse," is included in The Best of Rock & Ice (The Mountaineers Books, 1999). ▲