



High Sierra Climbing

SECOND EDITION

Chris McNamara
McKenzie Long

 **SUPERTOPO™**

High Sierra Climbing

California's Best High
Country Climbs

Chris McNamara
McKenzie Long



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Front cover: Trish McGuire climbing the amazing final pitch on the Third Pillar of Dana (5.10b). Touted as “the best pitch in the universe.” *Photo: Ken Etzel*

Back cover: While on the Thunderbolt to Sill Traverse in the Palisades, Brian Russell makes his way to the U Notch, with a building storm and the fifth and final fourteener, Mt. Sill (14,153 ft), on the horizon. *Photo: Ken Etzel*

Chris McNamara and McKenzie Long
High Sierra Climbing: California’s Best High Country Climbs

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Warning!

Climbing is an inherently dangerous sport in which severe injuries or death may occur. Relying on the information in this book may increase the danger.

When climbing you can only rely on your skill, training, experience, and conditioning. **If you have any doubts as to your ability to safely climb any route in this guide, do not try it.**

This book is neither a professional climbing instructor nor a substitute for one. **It is not an instructional book. Do not use it as one.** It contains information that is nothing more than a compilation of opinions about climbing in the High Sierra. **These opinions are neither facts nor promises.** Treat the information as opinions and nothing more. Do not substitute these opinions for your own common sense and experience.

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Researching.

Photo by Luke Lydiard

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- McKenzie Long

Introduction

Bordered by a great agricultural area on one side and an inhospitable desert on the other, California's Sierra Nevada is the highest mountain range in the contiguous United States, and some say it is the most beautiful. It has almost everything a climber desires: rugged peaks, glaciers, and splendid, isolated chunks of granite. And these attractions are set in a lovely locale of lake basins, streams, and high meadows. The rock is generally good, the weather during the summer months is excellent, and the access is easy. What more could a climber want? If there is any disadvantage, it lies in the hordes of people who have recently found the range to their liking. The John Muir Trail, which runs the length of the High Sierra, is a crowded corridor in midsummer, yet the climber who is willing to wander just a few miles from it will find untrammeled lake basins at the base of peaks that see fewer than ten ascents a year.

Long ago the Spaniards saw the range and gave it its present name, which means "snowy range of mountains." In former times the 300-mile-long uplift posed a serious threat to east-west travel, and even now there are no roads across its most rugged portion for

175 miles. The crest of the range, which runs from northwest to southeast, contains scores of peaks above 13,000 feet, and 12 peaks rise above 14,000 feet. Nestled under the western side of the crest are hundreds of lakes, some set in high glacial basins and some surrounded by lush meadows.

The western side of the range slopes gently. It is nearly 50 miles from the Central Valley to the crest, and much of this distance is marked by heavy and varied forests. Scattered amid these forests are groves of "big trees," or sequoias. These enormous trees, endemic to the western slope of the Sierra, are one of the great tourist attractions of the West, and a national park has been named for them.

The summits themselves are often easiest to reach from the west, and almost every Sierra peak has at least one side that presents no problem for the climber. The north and east faces, however, tend to be steeper and have often been sculpted by glaciers.

The eastern escarpment of the High Sierra is a magnificent sight. Along its base runs U.S. 395, and from it the traveler can gaze upward nearly 2 vertical miles to see the range's culmination: Mt. Whitney. Roads that lead into the range begin in vast fields of sagebrush, wind through the pinyon juniper belt, and finally pass through several varieties of pine.

A view of Cathedral Peak and Eichorn's Pinnacle from Echo Peaks.

Photo by Luke Lydiard



Driving up such a road one can experience a temperature drop of 20 degrees.

Much of the rock in the Sierra is granite of excellent quality; some, in fact, is world-renowned by rock climbers. The rock in the high country is heavily fractured, and although the rock itself may be solid, the disjointed structure makes for many loose blocks. The vast amount of rubble on ledges is proof that the mountains are continually falling to pieces. In addition to igneous rock, a few places such as the Ritter Range, Black Divide, and the Kaweahs are principally metamorphic, and some exceptionally loose rock is found in these areas. The climber must take every precaution on this type of rock.

Glaciers were active in the range for many centuries, and although only a few remnants survive, evidence of them abounds. The Kern River Valley, remarkably straight and U-shaped, is one of the finest examples of glacial action in the High Sierra, but almost every other valley shows prominent signs of the ice sheets that once scoured them.

General Climbing History

Indians were the first climbers of the High Sierra, as has been shown by arrowhead fragments found high on many peaks, including Mt. Whitney. But the Indians left

no records, and neither did the Spaniards, early military expeditions, prospectors, or sheepherders who followed. However, it is not likely that many major summits were reached during these early days, for as we all know, there are relatively few reasons to stand atop a mountain.

During the Gold Rush, thousands crossed the Sierra Nevada, but they all carefully avoided the highest and most rugged part of the range. By the time of the Civil War, California had become a populated state, yet little was known about its resources or geography. It was to rectify this deplorable situation that the legislature created the California Geological Survey in 1860. For a few years the Whitney Survey, as it soon became called after its leader, Josiah Whitney, did work in other parts of the state, moving into the Sierra foothills only in the summer of 1863. After spending time in the fabulous, recently discovered Yosemite Valley, the Survey climbed up toward Tuolumne Meadows. There, William Brewer, field leader of the Survey, Charles Hoffmann, and Whitney climbed a prominent peak, which they named Mt. Hoffmann. This is the first known ascent of a major peak in the High Sierra (Mt. Tom, near Bishop, may have been climbed in 1860). A few days later Brewer and Hoffmann climbed a very high summit that they named Mt. Dana, after the preeminent American geologist of the era. They thought the peak was higher than Mt. Shasta, which at that time was considered the highest point in the state. The next day Whitney climbed the peak to see the view; it was his last important Sierra climb, and he soon left the range to direct from afar. From then on Brewer and his associates dominated the Survey's mountaineering.

Without question, 1864 is the key year in the history of early Sierra climbing and exploration. That year the Survey was composed of Brewer, Hoffmann, Clarence King, James Gardiner, and the group's packer, Richard Cotter. Leaving Oakland in late May, they rode their mounts eastward. It was the driest summer in many years, and the party suffered in the oppressive heat. Mummified carcasses of cattle lay everywhere and dusty whirlwinds darted across the grasslands. It must have been a welcome relief to reach the mountains, which they did in early July



in the vicinity of the Kings River. Although there had been rumors of a great canyon in the area which rivaled Yosemite, no one had yet described it to the outside world. When Brewer's party finally came into the canyon, they were stunned—it was almost as spectacular as Yosemite, though it lacked waterfalls and monolithic cliffs. In the area of Kings Canyon they made several climbs, and members of the Survey immediately named one of these peaks Mt. Brewer. From its summit they saw a very high peak to the southeast. Thinking that it must be the highest point in the range (Mt. Dana had already been discredited), King and Cotter longed for it, and their epic five-day trek, described in a later chapter, was the first time in America's history that such mountainous and inhospitable terrain had been traversed.

A few weeks later members of the Survey crossed the range at Kearsarge Pass and dropped down into the Owens Valley. Although they visited a few more areas that summer, this is the last we hear of the Whitney Survey, for it soon completed its work and disbanded.

Luke Lydiard contemplating the Mithral Dihedral.
Photo by McKenzie Long



In the next few years many travelers came to the mountains to see the great canyons and big trees that had been gaining notoriety. One of these visitors was John Muir, who arrived in Yosemite Valley in 1868 for a brief stay. The following year he became a supervisor of sheepherders, a job that left him much free time to study the landscape. During the next few years Muir became a self-educated expert on the ecology of the Sierra. While in Tuolumne Meadows in 1869, he made the first ascent of the sharp and beautiful Cathedral Peak—this involved some difficult climbing of a nature not yet seen in this country. Although his mountaineering exploits are not as well known as his later geological theories, descriptive writings, and long struggles to exclude sheep and lumbermen from his beloved mountains, Muir's solo ascents of Mt. Ritter, Mt. Whitney, and many other peaks (mentioned only obliquely in his writings) place him among the first rank of early American mountaineers.

Though much country had been explored by the early 1890s, there were many blanks on the maps, and relatively few peaks had been climbed. Yet, remarkably, someone had already envisioned a trail stretching the length of the range. The idea had come to Theodore Solomons in 1884, when as a youth he had been herding cattle in the Central Valley and had been overwhelmed by a view of the Sierra on a pristine day. During the early 1890s Solomons set out summer after summer, seeking the most feasible path for his "high mountain route." Although he is best remembered for his explorations around the headwaters of the San Joaquin River and for many of the place names he bestowed in this area, the John Muir Trail, begun in 1915, is perhaps his greatest legacy to the Sierra.

Another important figure of this era was Joseph N. LeConte, the son of a famous geologist who had visited Muir in Yosemite in 1870. Barely five feet in height, "Little Joe" explored watersheds, climbed many peaks, made a splendid set of photographs, and drew the first accurate maps of much of the Sierra. Like Solomons, LeConte was a charter member of the Sierra Club, which had been founded in 1892. His maps, distributed to club members, materially contributed to further exploration of the range. Club outings, which

began in 1901 under the leadership of William Colby, brought more and more people into the mountains, in keeping with the club's bylaws "to render accessible the mountain regions."

James Hutchinson was the next prominent figure in the history of Sierra mountaineering. He was already 32 when, in 1899, he made his initial Sierra first ascent. During the next 20 years he compiled the most enviable first-ascent record any Sierra climber will ever have. A partial list of his peaks includes Matterhorn Peak, Mt. Mills, Mt. Abbot, Mt. Humphreys, North Palisade, and Black Kaweah.

Of all the men who have ever climbed in the Sierra, none was so legendary as Norman Clyde. A scholar of the classics, Clyde migrated west in the early part of the century, teaching at rural schools, but never staying in one place for very long. He seems to have been born with wanderlust. Clyde worked on his master's degree at Berkeley for a few years but dropped out over a dispute in curriculum. The following summer he made two first ascents in Yosemite. A curious gap of six years followed, but in 1920 he began to totally dominate the climbing history of the range. He moved to the east side of the Sierra in 1924 to become principal of the high school in Independence. He was 40 years old in the summer of 1925 and later wrote, "I sometimes think I climbed enough peaks this summer to render me a candidate for a padded cell—at least some people look at the matter in that way." In 1927, Clyde was involved in a Halloween scandal when he fired shots over the heads of pranksters who were trying to intimidate him. It was not thought proper for a high school principal to behave in such a manner, so Clyde left that job and for the next 40 years worked at odd jobs in the mountains, climbing at every opportunity. It is thought that he made over a thousand ascents in the range; his first ascents and new routes number around 130. If, as someone has said, the mark of a true mountaineer is his willingness to repeat climbs, then Clyde qualifies as few others are ever likely to do. He had many favorite peaks and would climb them year after year—he apparently ascended Mt. Thompson 50 times.

Clyde was famous for his huge packs, and it was a rare day when one would weigh less than 90 pounds. Guns, axes, cast-iron pots, and books in Greek all contributed to his

monstrous Trapper Nelson. Although Clyde did his last new route in 1946, he attended Sierra Club Base Camps and High Trips in the capacity of woodcutter and guide until 1970, when he retired at the age of 85. Two years later he died in Big Pine.

In 1931 Robert L.M. Underhill, an East Coast mountaineer well-versed in the school of European rope management, came to California at the invitation of Francis Farquhar, an early climber and later a respected Sierra historian. The two had met the previous summer in Canada, and Farquhar thought it would be a good idea if Californians learned something about proper rope techniques. The pair gathered a small group of interested and talented climbers and went on a grand tour of the Sierra. Several fine first ascents resulted and a new age of California climbing began. Rockclimber-mountaineers such as Raffi Bedayn, Dave Brower, Glen Dawson, Jules Eichorn, Richard Leonard, and Hervey Voge put up scores of difficult routes in Yosemite Valley and the High Sierra during the 1930s. These routes were of a standard little dreamed of by Muir, LeConte, or Hutchinson, involving high-angle rock and elaborate rope techniques to safeguard the participants. Few of the climbs in the High Sierra required a rope, but the confidence gained from the teachings of Underhill was invaluable. Leonard later wrote that if he were to fall, his first thought would be, "What would Underhill say of my technique?"

During the years after World War II most of the noteworthy climbing in the range was done by members of the Sierra Club outing groups. Since many of the peaks had already been ascended, the emphasis was on new routes on a multitude of virgin ridges and faces.

Rockclimbers "discovered" the big walls of the Sierra in the late 1950s. At first only the most prominent faces were climbed: Mt. Whitney's true east face in 1959, the southwest face of Mt. Conness in 1959, and the great east wall of Keeler Needle the following year. The leader of the last two climbs was the legendary Yosemite climber, Warren Harding. By the late 1960s hidden walls had been ferreted out, and though these were usually not more than 1,000 feet high, they were steep and difficult.

— Steve Roper

Overview of Climbs by Difficulty

For this second edition, as well as adding a few more classic rock lines, we added a number of more mountaineering ridges and peaks that demonstrate the beauty and mystique of the Sierra. We also decided to include a few snow and ice routes, since that is another important, albeit different, side of climbing in the Sierra. As rock climbing's mischievous twin, snow and ice climbing finds an alternative method to reach remote and beautiful summits. We have included a few of the classics. Climbing in an alpine environment often involves travel over snow, and while some climbers deal with this as a necessary evil, others seek out objectives of this type. Climbing in the Sierra is rich with a history of exploits involving ascents of all kinds, and here we are giving a nod to climbers of varying disciplines.

— *McKenzie Long*

Mt. Russell, East Ridge (3rd class)

This is probably the best 3rd class ridge in the Sierra. Either climb it as a route or use it as a descent after climbing Fishhook Arête.

Mountaineer's Route (3rd class)

This is a moderate passage to Whitney's summit that avoids the crowds of the Whitney Trail while delivering that big mountain feeling.

Mt. Ritter, Southeast Glacier Route (3rd class)

A beautiful route in the Ritter Range that combines both snow climbing and rock scrambling to summit an iconic peak.

North Peak, Northeast Couloir (AI2, 4th class)

A worthy, easily accessed alpine ice route with a rock step to reach the summit.

North Palisade, U Notch (AI2, 4th class)

A long approach, exciting alpine ice, technical rock climbing, and stunning views all contribute to a big mountain experience.

Laurel Mountain, Northeast Gully (5.2)

This scramble is more about the location and views than the climbing quality. In the mile of mostly 3rd and 4th class rock there are a few 5th class moves. This route is usually soloed.

Mt. Emerson, Southeast Face (5.4)

Surprisingly fun, and with the crux 5th class moves right off the ground, most climbers solo this quality and solid route.

Bear Creek Spire, Northeast Ridge (5.5)

Some feel this climb is as classic as the North Arête. The climbing is mostly 3rd and 4th class, but there are a few 5th class moves. Most confident Sierra climbers who can handle big exposure solo the route.

Tenaya Peak, Northwest Buttress (5.5, 14 pitches)

This is the Royal Arches of Tuolumne with endless amounts of fun, moderate climbing in a spectacular setting.

Lone Pine Peak, North Ridge (5.5)

A long and committing ridge traverse composed of mostly 3rd and 4th class scrambling, this route is climbed in a loop. It is an excellent option if you cannot get a permit for climbing in the Whitney Zone.

Mt. Humphreys, East Arête (5.5)

A long ridge climb with slightly more continuous technical climbing than the North Ridge of Lone Pine Peak. The summit provides breathtaking views of the Humphreys Basin.

Cathedral Peak (5.6, 5 pitches)

Incredibly popular for good reason: solid rock, moderate climbing, and an outstanding summit.

Mt. Conness, North Ridge (5.6)

If Cathedral Peak is the best intro peak climb, this is the best intro mountain climb. Mostly 4th class with occasional 5th class moves in a great position.

Mt. Conness, West Ridge (5.6, 12 pitches)

The best 5.6 mountain climb in the High Sierra. Mostly moderate moves and relatively straightforward. Easy to bypass exposure and harder moves if necessary.

Crystal Crag, North Arête (5.7, 3 pitches)

An excellent intro peak climb with a short approach, this is the best warm-up peak for climbers new to the area. The final pitch climbs a unique corridor of crystal.

Matterhorn Peak (5.7, 6 pitches)

An aesthetic peak with a huge approach and mediocre climbing. The full High Sierra experience at only moderate technical difficulty.

Matthes Crest, Traverse from South to North (5.7)

One of the more unique rock formations anywhere. Mostly 4th class with a few sections of either 5th class moves or big exposure. The second half involves slightly more difficult moves and more down-climbing.

Mt. Whitney, East Face (5.7, 13 pitches)

A wandering journey up mostly 3rd and 4th class terrain with a few memorable pitches of exposure and technical difficulty. A *50 Classic*.

Mt. Whitney, East Buttress (5.7, 11 pitches)

An excellent moderate alpine climb. The climbing is more interesting and more sustained than the East Face, but still rarely has a crux longer than 20 feet.

Petite Griffon, Southeast Face (5.7, 3 pitches)

A long approach for a short route, but fun climbing leads to a small summit on a unique spire feature.

Mt. Sill, Swiss Arête (5.7, 5 pitches)

Incredible quality climbing on good rock leads to one of the most scenic summits in the Sierra, with views of both Mt. Whitney and Ritter and Banner. If only there were more climbing!

Temple Crag, Venusian Blind (5.7, 12 pitches)

This is one of the more moderate and quality arêtes on Temple Crag. The climb is long and exposed with a few technical sections between arête and ridge scrambling.

Temple Crag, Moon Goddess Arête (5.8, 14 pitches)

Similar to Venusian Blind, this route ascends an exposed arête with a few technical sections separated by fun scrambling.

Charlotte Dome, South Face (5.8, 12 pitches)

This is a favorite Sierra climb for many people, and a *50 Classic*. The climbing is sustained and on exceptional featured rock reminiscent of Tuolumne.

Bear Creek Spire, North Arête (5.8, 10 pitches)

This is one of the more accessible Sierra peaks, and fast teams often climb it car-to-car in a day. The first half of the route ascends a striking and steep arête while the second half is a scramble up an enjoyable and exposed ridge.

Clyde Minaret, Southeast Face (5.8, 12 pitches)

This route has the option of a moderate, but hard to find start, or a direct start that ascends fun cracks and goes at 5.10. One of the *50 Classics*, this route on surprisingly solid metamorphic rock is popular.

Eichorn's Pinnacle, West Pillar (5.9, 5 pitches)

This is a more challenging and less crowded way to get to the most striking summit in Tuolumne, if not the entire High Sierra.

Mt. Russell, Fishhook Arête (5.9, 8 pitches)

A combination of size, rock quality, and the striking arête make this a must-do for experienced Sierra climbers. Once you see the route from the summit of Mt. Whitney, you will be compelled to climb it.

Mt. Goode, North Buttress (5.9, 9 pitches)

The relatively straightforward approach, beautiful setting and steep, dramatic buttress add to the appeal of this route.

Cardinal Pinnacle, West Face (5.10a, 4 pitches)

Solid granite cracks on an easy-to-access peak with almost no approach makes this a must-do for the 5.10 climber.

Mithral Dihedral, Mt. Russell (5.10a, 6 pitches)

Amazing granite crack climbing at 14,000 feet! Often shady and cold, but worth it.

Temple Crag, Sun Ribbon Arête (5.10a, 18 pitches)

This is one of the longest and most classic arêtes in the High Sierra and offers a rare opportunity for a Tyrolean Traverse. You must move fast on this one.

Third Pillar of Dana, Regular Route (5.10b, 5 pitches)

Four pitches of good climbing lead to what is probably the best finishing pitch of any High Sierra climb.

Incredible Hulk, Red Dihedral (5.10b, 11 pitches)

The Incredible Hulk has probably the best rock in the High Sierra and the Red Dihedral is its most classic 5.10 route. This climb is long, sustained, and amazing.

Merriam Peak, North Buttress (5.10b, 11 pitches)

Exciting and sustained climbing on an intriguing feature. The Triple Cracks pitch is fun and memorable.

Mt. Conness, Southwest Face (5.10c, 9 pitches)

This climb looks like a true alpine big wall from a distance, from the base, and when you are on it. The climbing is mostly 5.8 and 5.9 with a few distinct 5.10 cruxes.

Keeler Needle, Harding Route (5.10c, 13 pitches)

This is the coolest-looking formation in the High Sierra but the rock is not as good as it looks. A huge and adventurous climb.

Temple Crag, Dark Star (5.10c, 16 pitches)

Aside from ridge traverses and link-ups, this is the longest technical route in the Sierra, which makes it worth climbing in itself. The first couple pitches are the cruxes, after which there is a lot of easier climbing and scrambling. Requires moving fast to cover the terrain.

Incredible Hulk, Positive Vibrations (5.11a, 13 pitches)

Probably the best route in the High Sierra. Long and sustained with perfect rock. It doesn't get any better.

Incredible Hulk, Sun Spot Dihedral (5.11b, 12 pitches)

More sustained and almost as classic as Positive Vibrations. Long endurance pitches with occasional technical cruxes.

High Sierra Climbing Beta

High Sierra Climbing Skills

You need a solid base of trad climbing skills to lead a High Sierra route. Most climbs will involve a little bit of every technique from face climbing and stemming to hand cracks and the occasional chimney. Build confidence with

these techniques on multipitch climbs at a granite area like Tuolumne Meadows, Yosemite Valley, or Lover's Leap.

When choosing a climb, keep in mind that in the High Sierra, most climbers lead at least a number grade lower than their cragging ability. For example, if you lead 5.9 trad at the crags, you will probably only be comfortable leading 5.8 or even 5.7 in the High Sierra. This is because you are generally weaker at high altitude, but also because you must not fall on Sierra climbs. Because of the ledgy terrain, even short falls are serious and rescue is usually at least a day away.

Climbing a grade lower than your cragging ability will also allow you to move fast, avoid storms, and prevent you from getting benighted, which are all important aspects of climbing in the mountains. Allow yourself the extra energy to deal with unforeseen problems by not pushing your limit to the extreme.

High Sierra Non-Climbing Skills

Technical climbing skills are only a small requirement for High Sierra routes. Routefinding skills, hiking fitness, and general mountain sense are just as important. Approaches typically involve at least a few miles of hiking off a main trail. Our *High Sierra Climbing* guidebook features the most detailed info ever provided for these approaches. However, you will still need some basic orienteering skills to navigate through cross-country sections. Also, High Sierra climbs ascend complex and confusing terrain that demands careful attention to the topo and some intuition. Important tip: on the approach, keep the topo handy and study the route from a distance. Do not wait until you are at the base to look at the topo. At that point, much of the upper route will probably be hidden and it may be hard to orient yourself. Almost all climbs require a substantial approach at high elevation. If out of shape, you may be too tired to climb by the time you reach the base of the route. All *High Sierra Climbing* routes can be climbed car-to-car in a day by a fast team. Most parties, however, will prefer to camp near the base, therefore you will also need all the requisite backcountry camping skills.

McKenzie Long starts up Matthes Crest.
Photo by Luke Lydiard



Climbing Gear

Climb light. Carrying a heavy pack and rack at altitude will slow you down and, more importantly, remove the fun. Carry only what you need (but don't skimp on food, water, and a rain shell).

The typical rack includes: one 8.5-9mm rope, 1 set of nuts, 1-2 sets of cams .6-3", 10 slings, 20 lightweight carabiners, belay device, and a lightweight harness. For the High Sierra, slings are better than quickdraws because they are more versatile. On a wandering pitch you will want a sling on every piece to reduce rope drag and on straight up and down pitches you can convert your slings into make-shift quickdraws. 60m ropes are preferred because they are lighter than 70m ropes and after 60m it is usually impossible to communicate with the belayer. A 50m is even lighter. (Most of the topos in the *High Sierra Climbing* guidebook are set for 50m ropes, but we tell you where you can link pitches with a 60m rope or may need a 70m). A retreat rope may be helpful for some climbs. However, sometimes it is better to rappel with just one rope because long rappels in the High Sierra often result in stuck ropes or pulling loose blocks down on yourself.

Non-Climbing Gear

Sun hat, sunscreen, sunglasses, (remember the sun is more intense at altitude) warm hat, water-resistant lightweight jacket (don't bring a heavy Gore-Tex jacket), water filter or iodine tablets, and a pencil (so you can make comments and suggestions on the SuperTopos and send us feedback!). Don't forget the trekking poles. These indispensable companions will save your knees and help you move faster. They also make a great "rudder" when glissading. Get the lightweight kind that collapse really small (we like Leki poles). Also, hike in using lightweight approach shoes. Remember, you climb carrying your approach shoes so don't bring heavy hiking boots. Definitely bring a headlamp (lightweight LED models are best). An ice axe and crampons are also necessary for several climbs in this book.

Also, any backcountry camping gear you will need for your overnight stays.

Altitude Sickness

It takes a few days for most people to adjust to the rarefied air. Not to mention, climbing

at altitude makes everything feel much harder. Drink lots of water and don't run around too fast if you're just coming up from low elevations. It's a good idea to camp at least one night at the trailhead and a better idea to spend a few days cragging at high elevation. Tuolumne Meadows is the best place for high altitude cragging. If you can't make it there check out Rock Creek for awesome granite trad and sport climbs at the Main Attraction Wall and Iris Slabs.

If you do get a bad headache or feel nauseous, the best cure is to head to lower elevation.

Thunderstorms and Lightning Strikes

The High Sierra has some of the best weather of any alpine rock climbing area on earth. That said, note that the High Sierra is still in a massive mountain range and receives severe thunderstorms and lightning throughout the summer. Check the weather before you climb and scope the retreat route beforehand. Most thunderstorms originate from the west, so if you are climbing an east-facing route, you may not see thunderstorms until they are on top of you. Always carry a rain shell.

Lightning tends to hit high points, trees, and water, but will hit low points next to high rocks, flat areas near tall trees, and dry land in areas with lakes. Know how to perform CPR. Unlike with nearly any other type of injury that stops the heart, electrical shock victims can suddenly respond even after extended CPR, so CPR should be continued indefinitely.

Current Road and Weather

Your best bet is to check the general High Sierra Weather: <http://www.weather.com/weather/local/USCA0661>

Getting There

Air Travel

The Mammoth/Yosemite airport brings you right into the heart of the Eastern Sierra, but can be expensive and often has flights cancelled if the weather is bad. It only receives flights from a few other airports, so depending on where you are flying from, making a connection can be tricky. The Reno/Tahoe Airport is the second best option. From there, you will need to rent a car and drive 2-3.5 hours to your climbing destination. You

can also fly into Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Sacramento, or Fresno. Each of these places requires a 5-7 hour drive to the East Side.

Bus Travel

The Eastern Sierra has little bus service or public transportation. The Eastern Sierra Transit Authority runs a shuttle from Lone Pine to Reno and back, with stops at towns along the way. This bus only runs on certain days of the week at specific times, and it is best to call to reserve a spot. For more information call 800-922-1930 or visit estransit.com.

Car Travel

Almost all climbs are accessed by U.S. 395 and the small Eastern Sierra towns of Lone Pine, Independence, Big Pine, Bishop, Tom's Place, Mammoth Lakes, and Bridgeport.

Below are the general driving times (in hours) to the Eastern Sierra (times vary depending on which trailhead you are heading for).

From Tuolumne Meadows: 1-3; Yosemite Valley: 2-4; Reno: 2-4; Los Angeles: 4-6; San Francisco: 5-7; Las Vegas: 4-6; Salt Lake City: 9-11; Boulder: 18-20.

Nearby Towns and Trailheads

Lone Pine and Whitney Portal Essentials

Nearby Peaks: Mt. Russell, Mt. Whitney, Lone Pine Peak.

Groceries: **Joseph's Bi-Rite Market**

Restaurants: **The Pizza Factory** (301 South Main Street; 760-876-4707) has inexpensive pizza and a salad bar. **Mt. Whitney Restaurant** (Corner of U.S. 395 and Whitney Portal Road; 760-876-5751) is open seven days a week and serves buffalo, ostrich, and veggie burgers.

Totem Cafe (131 South Main Street; 760-876-1120) has American-style cuisine and patio dining. **Seasons Restaurant** (206 South Main Street; 760-876-8927) is pricey, but serves good food and large portions. **PJ's Bake and Broil** (446 South Main Street; 760-876-5796) is the classic diner in town.

Services at Whitney Portal: Don't miss the hamburgers and french fries at the **Whitney Portal Store** (760-876-0030). The Whitney Portal Store also sells tourist stuff, maps, books, and they have a great deal on bear canisters, which you can also rent.

Trailhead Camping: It is often a good idea to camp at the Whitney Portal before starting your climb. You will get an early start on the hike and start acclimatizing (Whitney Portal is at 8,300 feet). There are ten walk-in sites near the trailhead (follow signs to "Hiker Overnight Camping") reserved for hikers/climbers that cost \$10 a night and are first come, first served. You can also stay at the **Whitney Portal Campground** but will have to shell out \$17-\$20 a night and it is recommended to reserve your site in advance.

Independence and Onion Valley Essentials

Nearby Peak: Charlotte Dome

Groceries: There is a small market in town but your best bet is to shop at Joseph's in Lone Pine or one of the three markets in Bishop.

Restaurants: Not much to choose from but **Jenny's Café** (246 North Edwards Street; 760-878-2266) offers homestyle cooking.

Trailhead Camping: Onion Valley Campground is located at 9,200 feet, costs \$16/night (reservations recommended; 877-444-6777) and has picnic tables and piped water.

Big Pine and Big Pine Creek Essentials

Nearby Peaks: Temple Crag, Mt. Sill

Groceries: Carroll's Market and the Mobil Station are limited and have the only groceries in town. Stock up in Bishop, which is 15 miles north on U.S. 395.

Restaurants: **Uncle Bud's** (120 South Main Street) has pizzas, salads, and sandwiches and **Ross's Steak and Spaghetti Restaurant** (100 South Main Street; 760-938-2254) serves dinner.

Services at Big Pine Creek: Glacier Lodge (11 miles west of U.S. 395; 760-938-2837) has cabins for \$135/night during peak season that sleep two to nine people, a general store, and a restaurant. \$4 showers are available between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. **Glacier Pack Train** (0.5 mile east of Glacier Lodge; 760-938-2538) provides pack trips into the backcountry.

Trailhead Camping: Big Pine Creek Campground and Upper Sage Flat Campground are located along Glacier Lodge Road at 7,700 feet and have picnic tables, restrooms, and water. Both are \$20/night (reservations recommended; 877-444-6777). If you are up for hiking in a mile to First Falls, there is a free walk-in campground with picnic tables, fire rings, and pit toilets.

Bishop and South Lake Essentials

Nearby Peaks: Mt. Goode, Mt. Emerson, Mt. Humphreys, Cardinal Pinnacle.

Groceries: **Vons** (North Main Street) is the gigantic grocery store located next to K-mart. **Joseph's Bi-Rite Market** is in the center of town, across from The Gear Exchange, and **Manor Market** (3100 West Line Street) has a great beer and wine selection as well as a deli and basic groceries.

Restaurants and Cafés: **The Black Sheep** (232 North Main Street; 760-872-4142) is an excellent local coffee shop and a perfect rest day hang out. Across the street is another café, **The Looney Bean** (399 North Main Street; 760-873-3311). Bishop has several great places to eat. **The Burger Barn** (2675 West Line Street) makes delicious homemade burgers, fries, and shakes. **Jack's Waffle Shop** (437 North Main Street; 760-872-7971) serves breakfast. **Schat's Bakkery** (763 North Main Street; 760-873-7156) has every type of pastry and excellent sandwiches and bread. **Thai Thai** (703 Airport Road; 760-872-2595), at the Bishop airport, has the best and most authentic Thai cuisine on the East Side. For Mexican food there are three options: At **Amigos** (285 North Main Street; 760-872-2189) try the carne asada, **Taqueria Las**

Palmas (136 East Line Street; 760-873-4337) has awesome burritos, and **La Casita** (175 South Main Street; 760-873-4828) has okay food and a full bar (that means margaritas!). **Whiskey Creek** (524 North Main Street; 760-873-7174) has a great bar with yummy salads, pub food, and a sit-down dining room with fancier choices such as filet mignon and ahi tuna. **Upper Crust Pizza** (1180 North Main Street; 760-872-8153) has some of the best pizza we've tasted—try the "Illusian." There is also a **Pizza Factory** (970 N Main Street; 760-872-8888).

Other: **The Rubber Room** (175-B North Main Street; 888-395-ROCK) is the best place anywhere for quality resoles. There is a Bank of America, Washington Mutual, and Union Bank of California in town. The **Bishop Twin Theatre** (237 North Main Street; 760-873-3575) has two screens and new movies weekly. **Mountain Light Gallery** (106 South Main Street; 760-873-7700) features the incredible work of Galen and Barbara Rowell and is definitely worth a visit.

Services at South Lake: There is a general store in Habbeggers, which is 3 miles from Highway 168 on the way to South Lake.

Mike Collins ridge traversing near the summit of Merriam Peak.
Photo by Dale Apgar



Trailhead Camping: Willow Campground is located at 9,000 feet on the road to South Lake. Sites are \$20/night. You'll need to get water from the creek. **North Lake Campground** lies at the Mt. Emerson trailhead, is open from June to September, and is first come, first served. There are also several other campgrounds located along Highway 168.

Tom's Place and Rock Creek Essentials

Nearby Peaks: Bear Creek Spire, Petite Griffon

Groceries: There is a little grocery store at Tom's Place, but for major groceries head 20 minutes south to Bishop or 15 minutes north to Mammoth Lakes. Bishop has three large stores and Mammoth Lakes has a Vons.

Restaurants: **Tom's Place Resort** (right off U.S. 395) has lodging as well as a restaurant and bar (next to the store). Don't miss **Pie in the Sky**, (760-935-4311) located up Rock Creek Road, with amazing homemade pies. They go fast, so stop by in the morning. For a more extensive selection, cruise down the grade to Bishop or up to Mammoth Lakes.

Services at Rock Creek: Rock Creek Lodge (85 Rock Creek Road; 760-935-4170) has a small store and a restaurant.

Trailhead Camping: Mosquito Flat Trailhead Campground is a free walk-in campground only for persons with an overnight backcountry permit for the following day, and the stay limit is only one night. The campground is located across the bridge that leads to Eastern Brook Lakes. There are 12 other campgrounds to choose from between Tom's Place and Mosquito Flat that cost around \$15-\$20 a night. Most of these campgrounds do not require reservations.

Mammoth Lakes Essentials

Nearby Peaks: Crystal Crag, Clyde Minaret, Mt. Ritter

Groceries: There are only two options in Mammoth: **Vons** (off Old Mammoth Road) and a small health food store, **Sierra Sundance**, which is located in the Rite Aid Plaza off Main Street.

Restaurants and Cafés: **Black Velvet Coffee** (3343 Main Street Suite F) has by far the best coffee around. Try an americano or their unique cold brew. Across the street, **Stellar Brew Natural Café** (3280 B Main Street; 760-924-3559) offers coffee, baked goods,

and excellent breakfast burritos and lunches, all with vegan and gluten free options. Try **Roberto's Mexican Café** (271 Old Mammoth Road; 760-934-3667) or **Gomez's** (100 Canyon Boulevard; 760-924-2693) for great Mexican food and strong margaritas, **Shogun** (452 Old Mammoth Road; 760-934-3970) for fresh sushi, **Good Life Café** (126 Old Mammoth Road; 760-934-1734) for healthy food and fresh eating options, **Burgers** (6118 Minaret Road; 760-934-6622) for awesome burgers and fries or **Z Ranch** (4 Alpine Circle; 760-934-4492) for unique bar fare, including fried beets and pickles. For pizza, there is **Z Pizza** (26 Old Mammoth Road; 760-934-5800) or **Nik-N-Willie's** (100 Old Mammoth Road; 760-934-2012).

Camping: The Mammoth Lakes Basin has five campgrounds that put you in close proximity to Crystal Crag. **Twin Lakes Campground** is open the longest in the summer and costs \$21 per night. Sites can be reserved ahead of time by calling 1-877-444-6777. **Lake Mary Campground**, also \$21 per night, is first come, first served. For campsites that serve as a launching pad for Clyde Minaret or Mt. Ritter, there are seven forest service campgrounds near Devil's Postpile. **Agnew Meadows Campground** and **Reds Meadow Campground** are the most convenient and cost \$20 per night, but also require a \$7 fee for riding the shuttle past the Devil's Postpile Entrance Station.

Alternatively, there are a few campgrounds right as you arrive into town, such as **New and Old Shady Rest Campgrounds**. They are less scenic than the Lakes Basin sites, but incredibly easy to access, and cost \$20 per night.

Tuolumne Meadows/Lee Vining Essentials

Nearby Peaks: Mt. Conness, Third Pillar of Dana, Cathedral Peak, Matthes Crest

Groceries: A limited selection of high-priced groceries are available at the Tuolumne Meadows store. In addition, you can purchase groceries in Lee Vining at the Lee Vining Market. Mammoth has a large Vons supermarket.

Restaurants: The **Tuolumne Meadows Grill** serves hamburgers, fries, etc., and has limited hours. The **Tuolumne Lodge** has a restaurant that serves breakfast and dinner in the middle part of summer. Eight miles

east of Tuolumne Meadows, the **Tioga Pass Resort** houses a cozy dining room with good food. The **Mobil Gas Station**, located 14 miles from Tuolumne Meadows in Lee Vining, serves some of the best food in the area. This isn't just any gas station—its deli has a great selection of sandwiches, pizzas, fish tacos, and a variety of other savory treats for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Camping: The **Tuolumne Meadows Campground** is located next to the Tuolumne Store and has about 300 sites. Half of the sites can be reserved in advance, which should be done at least 2-3 months early, and half of the sites are on a first come, first served basis (arrive in the morning to ensure you get a site). Sites cost \$20 per night with a six-person, two-car limit. Mosquitoes can be particularly fierce so bring bug spray and bug netting. Bears regularly break into cars with food in them so use bear boxes.

Located 7 to 10 miles east of Tuolumne Meadows are five Forest Service campgrounds, many of which are first come, first served. These campgrounds are often battered by icy winds. Twelve miles east of Tuolumne Meadows, the **Lower Lee Vining Campground** is not only sheltered from the wind, it's set next to a beautiful trout-stocked creek at 7,300 feet. You will pay \$14 per night on a first come, first served basis, and there is no running water. Along Highway 120 toward Yosemite Valley are several additional campgrounds requiring moderate to long drives. The campground reservation office in Tuolumne has information on current campground conditions.

There are two free camping areas near Mono Lake:

1) 2.2 miles below Conway Summit at the north end of the guardrail at the huge turn. It can be tricky to find a perfectly flat spot. Great view of Mono Lake. The Buttermilk-looking boulders nearby actually have terrible rock.

2) Black Point: From Lee Vining, head north on U.S. 395 for about 5 miles to Cemetery Road. Drive 3.3 miles on Cemetery Road (mostly dirt road, low clearance okay) and take a right on the road that leads to Black Point. When there is an option, stay right.

Lodges and Cabins: In addition to campsites, there are more plush accommodations available in Tuolumne and the High Sierra, including the **Tuolumne**

Meadows Lodge, White Wolf, and the High Sierra Camps. Just outside of the park boundary is the **Tioga Pass Resort** (www.tiogapassresort.com), which offers cabins year-round (in the winter you need to ski or snowmobile up to them). Drive 15 miles east from Tuolumne Meadows and you will reach Lee Vining, a small town with a few motels, restaurants, and other basic services.

Bridgeport and Twin Lakes Essentials

Nearby Peaks: Incredible Hulk, Matterhorn Peak

Groceries: There is a small market.

Restaurants: **Hays Street Café** (21 Hays Street; 760-932-7141) is a great breakfast and lunch spot (it is a little pricey). There are a few decent burger spots, too.

Services at Twin Lakes: The **Twin Lakes Resort** (760-932-7751) has a small store and a restaurant that serves great burgers.

Trailhead Camping: **Mono Village Campground** (760-932-7071) at 7,100 feet is \$18 per night. **Lower Twin Lake Campground** rests at 7,000 feet and is \$20 per night. **Honeymoon Flat Campground** is \$17 per night.

Hot Springs: 0.25 mile south of town on U.S. 395 turn east onto Jack Sawyer Road. When the paved road veers right after a few hundred yards, continue straight on a dirt road for less than a mile to its end. The tubs are paved and clean, but often crowded.

When to Climb

Almost everyone climbs in the High Sierra between June and October. From November through April, the High Sierra is pounded with snow from big Pacific storms.

Note: Below, the snow conditions are listed for an average snow year. Most snow years are not average and the projections below will be way off if it has been a heavy or light snow year. Your best bet is to search online for your climb on the SuperTopo Route Beta page to check current conditions. If there is nothing there, ask a question in the SuperTopo Forum.

May – Only in low snow years will climbs be easily accessible. In general, most of the approaches will be snow-covered and many of the access roads may not be plowed. May is mostly dry, but expect a few storms. There are no crowds in May.

June – Aside from a rare storm, June is usually dry with warm temps and nice long days. Most of the access roads are plowed, but there will still be snow on most approaches. Thunderstorms begin to develop so keep a close eye on the weather. The crowds start showing at the end of June, and it becomes more competitive to get overnight camping permits.

July and August – Prime Sierra climbing weather. Temperatures are hot at the trailheads, but perfect on the climbs. This is also prime thunderstorm season so watch the weather closely. There are crowds, and it is competitive for overnight camping permits (get reservations at least a month in advance).

September – Still great climbing conditions, but the nights are cool. Some north-facing routes may be uncomfortably cold in the shade. The crowds start to thin.

October – Shorter days and cold nights mean less people. Climbing in the shade is no fun. Weather is mostly dry, but the first winter storm can arrive late in the month. Easy to get overnight camping permits.

November – Frigid nights and short days keep most people out of the High Sierra. Winter storms begin to arrive more frequently. A rare time to get some solitude before the heavy snow sets in.

December-April – Got skis? Frequent winter storms and icy temperatures make the High Sierra only accessible to those who enjoy suffering. In exceptionally dry years, during a warm spell, you may be able to run up one of the peaks in a day in December.

Camping and Permits

Backcountry Camping Permits

When camping overnight in the backcountry, you always need a permit, which can be picked up at one of the ranger stations listed below (sorry, no mail order permits). A quota system is in place in the summer and fall, which means only a limited number of permits are issued each day. Of this number, 25-40 percent are available on a walk-in basis for free at the ranger station the day before you plan to leave, and 60-75 percent of the permits can be reserved in advance for a fee. Most of the classic Sierra climbs are accessed off popular trails where permits are in high demand,

especially from June to August. During this time, you may need to reserve your permit more than a month in advance. If you show up for a walk-in permit, you may be denied.

The Mt. Whitney Zone, which includes Keeler Needle and Mt. Russell, has its own permit system with a daily quota from May 1 to November 1, and permits are required even for day use. This means that you are required to have a permit to climb in this area, even if you do not plan to camp. Walk in permits are not set aside for the Whitney Zone area, meaning that the number available can vary. It is highly recommended to reserve your permit in advance if you plan to climb in this high-demand area.

Questions about pick-up times and instructions can be directed to the **Wilderness Permit Office**: 760-873-2483.

Ranger Stations

Mt. Whitney Zone

Popular peaks: Mt. Whitney, Mt. Russell, Keeler Needle

Eastern Sierra InterAgency Visitor Center

(Junction of Highway 395 and State Route 136 2 miles south of Lone Pine; 760-876-6222) All Mt. Whitney Zone permits must be picked up at this location.

Inyo National Forest

Popular peaks: Temple Crag, Palisades, Mt. Goode, Bear Creek Spire, Mt. Ritter, Clyde Minaret.

White Mountain Ranger Station (798

North Main Street, Bishop; 760-873-2500)

Mammoth Lakes Visitor Center (2500 Main

Street, Mammoth Lakes; 760-924-5500)

Mono Basin Scenic Area Visitor Center

(On U.S. 395, Lee Vining; 760-647-3044)

Tuolumne Wilderness Center (Highway

120, in parking lot 0.25 mile from ranger station; 209-372-0740, www.nps.gov/yose/wilderness/permits.htm)

Toiyabe National Forest/Hoover Wilderness

Popular Peaks: Matterhorn Peak, Incredible Hulk

Bridgeport Ranger Station

(On U.S. 395, 0.25 mile south of Bridgeport; 760-932-7070)

Kings Canyon National Park

Popular Peak: Charlotte Dome

Road's End Wilderness Permit Station

(located at the end of Highway 180;
559-565-3708)

Climbing Guides and Climbing Gear

There are several guiding services in the Sierra with friendly, experienced guides offering trips of all kinds, ranging from Mt. Whitney trips and rock climbing instructional trips, to guided ice climbing. Here are the primary companies:

Sierra Mountain Center (200 South Main Street, Bishop; 760-873-8526) is an excellent guiding service in the Eastern Sierra. They guide just about every classic climb in the High Sierra and many contained in the *High Sierra Climbing* guidebook. Their web site: www.sierramountaincenter.com is loaded with photos, route descriptions, slide shows, and extensive gear lists for most classic High Sierra climbs.

Sierra Mountain Guides (312 North Main Street, Bishop; 760-648-1122) teaches and guides all aspects of climbing in the rock, ice, and alpine realms, as well as backcountry skiing, ski mountaineering, avalanche education, and mountain trekking. Visit their website at www.sierramtnguides.com.

Sierra Mountaineering International (236 North Main Street, Bishop; 760-872-4929) offers a wide array of international trips, but also plenty of Whitney trips and instructional guiding. Check out the extensive photo galleries on www.sierramountaineering.com.

There are a few great climbing shops on the East Side that have everything you need for any climbing or backpacking adventure: **Wilson's Eastside Sports** (224 North Main Street, Bishop; 760-873-7520), **Mammoth Mountaineering Supply** (3189 Main Street, Mammoth Lakes; 760-934-4191), and the Bishop equivalent, which also sells used gear on consignment, the **Gear Exchange** (298 North Main Street, Bishop; 760-873-4300).

Bears

Every year the bears seem to get smarter and more aggressive. If you do not take precautions, YOUR CAR WILL BE BROKEN

INTO. Bears are active both at the trailhead parking areas and popular camping areas in the backcountry.

Bears at the Trailhead Parking Areas

While the Whitney and Onion Valley Trailheads currently have the worst problems, all Sierra trailheads experience bear break-ins. If you have any food or anything smelling like food in your car, it will be broken into. If you are lucky, they break a window. If you are unlucky, they will peel the upper part of the door down causing thousands of dollars in body damage to your car. However, even if your car is free of food, a bear may break into it just because he sees enough clutter (bags, backpacks, clothes, etc). For this reason, it is essential to clear out your car as much as possible before you reach the trailhead and put any loose items in the trunk. Make the car look empty. Food lockers are provided at the trailhead, but they are often full and not always secure so don't plan on using them for more than a night.

Bears in the Backcountry

A bear's natural habitat is the forests and shrublands below 8,000 feet (2,438 meters), but they will frequently roam above these elevations in order to steal food from backpackers. Don't even think about "bear bagging" your food (the bears figured this one out) or sleeping with your food (a backpacker has been mauled by a bear). The only way to protect your food is in a bear canister. These large black plastic containers are bulky, heavy, and a pain in the ass to deal with. However, they are also the only way to protect your food from bears and are mandatory in many popular backcountry areas. Bear canisters can be rented for between \$5 and \$10 per week from any ranger station, as well as at Mammoth Mountaineering in Mammoth Lakes or at the Whitney Portal Store. To own a bear canister, you will need to fork over between \$50-\$80.

Marmots and Mosquitos

Above 11,000 feet, the marmots are more of a problem than the bears. These furry little critters act cute, but if you drop your guard for

a minute they will devour your food with the grace and speed of a garbage disposal. Hang all of your food and anything scented (toothpaste, sunscreen, garbage) from a large boulder or, better yet, bring a bear canister (for rent at the ranger stations).

During a one-month period around June and July, the mosquitos are so dense that even repellent may not prevent bites. Their arrival varies from year to year, area to area, and depends on the snow year. Come prepared (especially if you are camping) with long pants, long sleeves, and DEET repellent. Ask rangers and the SuperTopo Forum about current mosquito conditions.

East Side Summer Cragging Areas

First-rate cragging abounds on the East Side. It is a good idea to crag at high elevation before climbing a High Sierra route to both acclimatize and get comfortable on Sierra granite. The areas listed below are between 8,000 and 10,000 feet and are climbable from May–October. There are a number of other crags and boulders at lower elevations, such as the **Buttermilks**, **Happy Boulders**, and **Owens River Gorge**. These areas are too hot in the summer.

Whitney Portal: Great climbing...if you climb 5.10 or harder. The rock and lines are as good as Yosemite and present a mixture of splitter cracks and face moves on 80-degree, white granite walls. The season is spring and fall. *Bishop Area Rock Climbs* by Marty Lewis is the best guidebook for the area.

Rock Creek/Iris Slab: Rock Creek has excellent (hard) bouldering along the river and super fun sport and gear climbs on perfect granite (there are not many routes under 5.10). Iris Slab has more easy and moderate climbs. The guidebook is *Bishop Area Rock Climbs*.

Dike Wall: Located above beautiful alpine lakes and easily accessed, the Dike Wall has excellent sport climbs that are 5.10 and up. Crystal Crag has more moderate sport climbs also of excellent quality. The best guidebook is *Mammoth Area Rock Climbs* by Marty Lewis and John Moynier.

Clark Canyon: Interesting sport climbing on volcanic rock, the routes here are mostly easy and make a fun in-between day activity. This and neighboring areas are also found in *Mammoth Area Rock Climbs*.

Climbing Crystal Crag with the Mammoth Lakes Basin in the background
Photo by Luke Lydiard



Free Climbing Ratings

USA UIAA France UK Australia

Yosemite Decimal System

5.1	I	1	M	4
5.2	II	2	D	6
5.3	III	2+	^{3A} VD	8
5.4	III+	3-		
5.5	IV	3	^{3B} ^{3C} HVD	10
5.6	IV+	3+	^{4C} S	12
5.7	V	4	^{4A} HS	14
5.8	V+	4+	^{4B} ^{4C} VS	16
5.9	VI-	5		18
5.10a	VI	5+	^{5C} ^{5A} HVS	18
5.10b	VI+	6a	^{5B} ^{5C} E1	19
5.10c	VII-	6a+	^{5C} E2	20
5.10d	VII	6b	^{5C} ^{6A} E3	21
5.11a	VII+	6b+		22
5.11b	VIII-	6c		23
5.11c		6c+	^{6A} E4	23
5.11d	VIII	7a		24
5.12a		7a+	^{6A} ^{6B} E5	25
5.12b	VIII+	7b		25
5.12c	IX-	7b+		26
5.12d	IX	7c	^{6B} ^{6C} E6	27
5.13a	IX+	7c+		28
5.13b	X-	8a	^{6C} E7	29
5.13c	X	8a+		30
5.13d	X	8b	^{6C} E8	31
5.14a	X+	8b+		32
5.14b	XI-	8c	^{7A} E9	33
5.14c	XI	8c+		34
5.14d	XI	9a	^{7A} ^{7B} E10	35
5.15a	XI+	9a+		36

Two climbers top out on the north summit of Crystal Crag.

Photo by Jediah Porter



Cam Sizes by Brand

Ref Size*	BD Camalots C4/C3's	Aliens	Metolius Cams	Trango Big Bros	Wild Country Friends
0.3"	000 gray	.33 black	00 gray		Zero #2-#6 covers .28-.94"
0.4"	00 purple				
0.5"	0 green C3	.375 blue	0 purple		0 red
0.6"	1 red	.5 green	1 blue		.5 orange
0.75"		.75 yellow	2 yellow		
1"	.3 blue C4/2 yellow C3 .4 gray	1 red	3 orange		1 yellow 1.25 purple
1.25"	.5 purple	1.5 orange	4 red		1.5 sky
1.5"	.75 green	2 purple	5 black		1.75 green
1.75"		2.5 gray	6 green		
2"	1 red	2.5 clear	7 blue		2 pink
2.5"			small grey		2.5 royal
	2 yellow				
3"					3 navy
	3 blue				3.5 purple
3.5"			medium maroon		4 black
3.5-4.5"			large dark blue	1 red	
	4 grey				4 silver
4.5-5.5"				2	
	5 purple				5 red
5.5-7"				3 green	
	6 green (7.6" max)				6 green (7.6" max)
7-8"				3 green	
8-12"				4 blue	

*"Ref size" is the optimal crack width for a given camming unit. It is not the max range given by the manufacturer.

Topo Symbols

Right-facing corner		Roof		Bolt	x
Left-facing corner		Ledge		Rappel anchor	
Straight-in crack		Slab		Face climbing	
Groove		Belay station		Pine tree	
Arête		Pitch length		Oak-like tree	
Flake		Optional belay		Bush	
Chimney		False belay		Knob	
				Hole	

Notes on Rack

- “nuts” refers to any nut, stopper, or chock. “micro” = #1, 2; “sml” = #3-5; “med” = #6-8; “lrg” = #9-13 (BD Stopper number)
- for cams, “2 ea .75-1.5” means bring two sets of all sizes between .75” and 1.5”. Check the cam size chart to see which cam corresponds to which crack size.

Notes on Topo

- “belay takes .6-1” means while leading the pitch save enough .6-1” cams and nuts to build a natural anchor.
- a number next to a tree is its height.

Topo abbreviations

- ow = offwidth
- lb = lieback
- p = fixed piton
- R- = somewhat runout
- R = runout (dangerous fall)

Metric system conversions

- 1 inch = 2.54 centimeters
- 1 foot = 0.305 meters
- 100 feet = 30.5 meters

Overview graphics

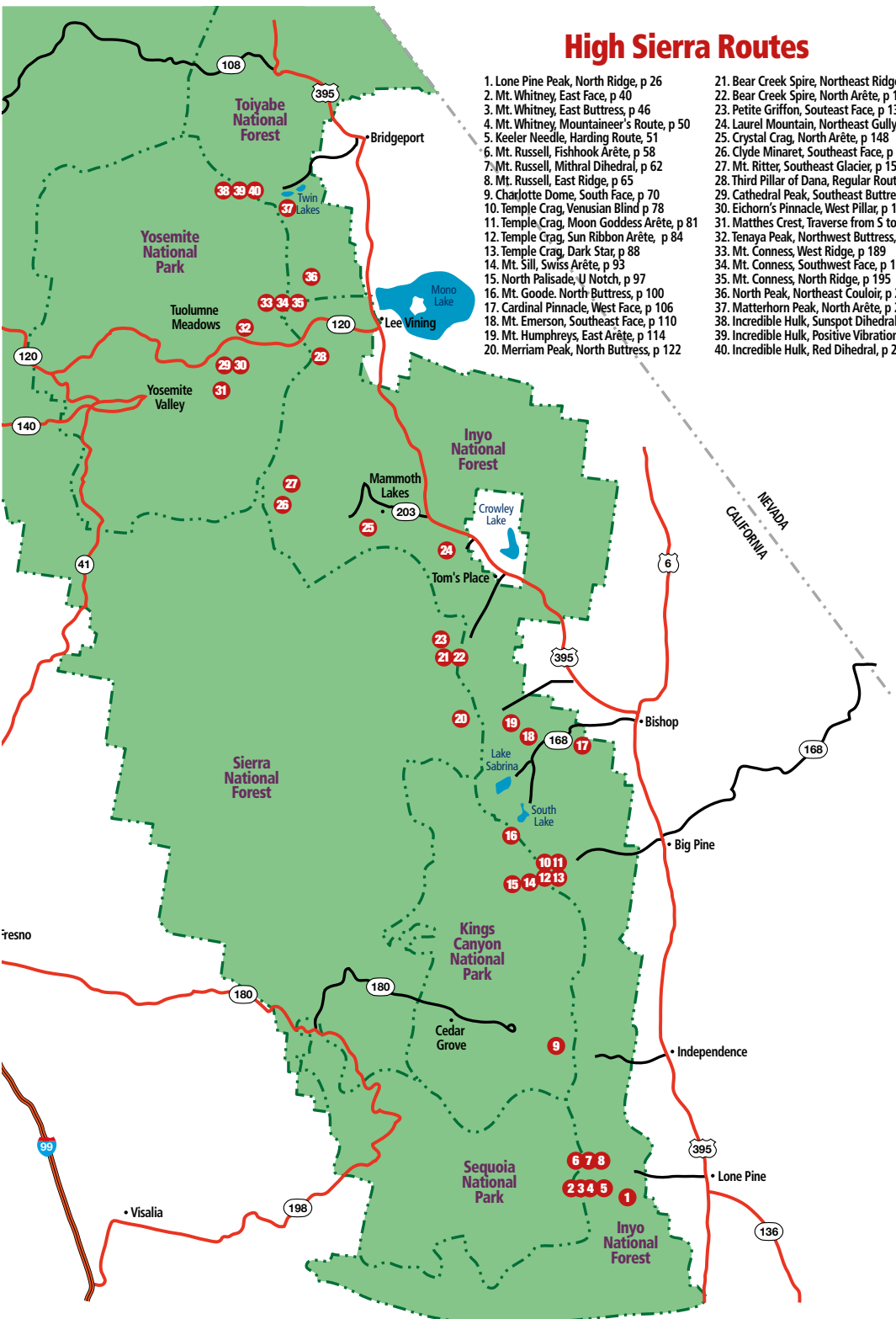
Low-clearance dirt road	
High-clearance dirt road	
Road or State Route	
Federal Highway	
Hikers’ trail	
Climbers’ trail	
Cross-country travel	

Star Ratings

- ★★★★★ - undisputed classic
- ★★★★ - excellent climb
- ★★★ - good climb
- ★★ - okay climb
- ★ - barely included in this book

High Sierra Routes

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2. Mt. Whitney, East Face, p 40
3. Mt. Whitney, East Buttress, p 46
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5. Keeler Needle, Harding Route, 51
6. Mt. Russell, Fishhook Arête, p 58
7. Mt. Russell, Mithral Dihedral, p 62
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9. Charlotte Dome, South Face, p 70
10. Temple Crag, Venusian Blind p 78
11. Temple Crag, Moon Goddess Arête, p 81
12. Temple Crag, Sun Ribbon Arête, p 84
13. Temple Crag, Dark Star, p 88
14. Mt. Sill, Swiss Arête, p 93
15. North Palisade, U Notch, p 97
16. Mt. Goode, North Buttress, p 100
17. Cardinal Pinnacle, West Face, p 106
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21. Bear Creek Spire, Northeast Ridge, p 132
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23. Petite Griffon, Southeast Face, p 138
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25. Crystal Crag, North Arête, p 148
26. Clyde Minaret, Southeast Face, p 152
27. Mt. Ritter, Southeast Glacier, p 159
28. Third Pillar of Dana, Regular Route, p 162
29. Cathedral Peak, Southeast Buttress, p 168
30. Eichorn's Pinnacle, West Pillar, p 172
31. Matthes Crest, Traverse from S to N, p 177
32. Tenaya Peak, Northwest Buttress, p 182
33. Mt. Conness, West Ridge, p 189
34. Mt. Conness, Southwest Face, p 192
35. Mt. Conness, North Ridge, p 195
36. North Peak, Northeast Couloir, p 200
37. Matterhorn Peak, North Arête, p 204
38. Incredible Hulk, Sunspot Dihedral, p 215
39. Incredible Hulk, Positive Vibrations, p 218
40. Incredible Hulk, Red Dihedral, p 222



Incredible Hulk

The Incredible Hulk (11,120') is known for three things: the best rock in the High Sierra, long routes, and incredibly sustained climbing. There are no easy routes on this face and, unlike most Sierra climbs, the Incredible Hulk remains sustained and challenging for a majority of the pitches (there are few pitches on any route easier than 5.8). The rock is clean and relatively unfractured and is more reminiscent of Yosemite climbing than the typical High Sierra peak.

Approach

The trailhead for the Incredible Hulk is at Twin Lakes, 13 miles west of the town of Bridgeport. Take U.S. 395 to the north end of Bridgeport, turn west onto the Twin Lakes Road and drive to its end in the Mono Village at the west end of the lake. There is a \$10 parking fee.

The approach takes most climbers 3-4 hours from Twin Lakes to the base of the climb (slightly longer if you are carrying a heavy pack) and involves 2.5 miles on the main trail, 2.5 miles on climbers' trails and cross-country travel, and gains about 3,400 feet in elevation. Finding the trailhead is difficult as you must navigate through the maze-like RV campground. (If getting a predawn start, scope out this section the day before.) Follow the main road due west. After a fire hydrant and before a bridge, turn right off the dirt road onto the Barney Lakes Trail that leads along Robinson Creek. If you cross the bridge, then you have gone too far. Walk on this trail for approximately 45 minutes (2.5 miles) until you reach a large pine tree with an equally large boulder sitting in front of it to the left of the trail (see photo.) There may also be cairns marking this turn. This should be few hundred yards before Little Slide Canyon.

This spot used to be marked with a wilderness boundary sign, but the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 added a significant parcel of land to the Hoover

Wilderness, and the boundary has moved to near the trailhead. This also means that even though bikes were previously allowed on this first part of the approach, they are no longer permitted.

From this point, turn left and walk cross-country southwest, angling toward Robinson Creek. After 100 yards, look for an opportunity to cross the creek on downed logs and beaver dams. If you find yourself in a big marsh with tall grass, you should probably reverse your steps and find a crossing farther east. After the crossing, walk along the west shore of Robinson Creek for a few hundred feet, locating a climbers' trail that enters a prominent grove of pine trees on the east side of Little Slide Canyon. The trail ascends steep dirt switchbacks through these trees for the next few hundred yards. Take the time to find this trail, or you will be bushwhacking forever up the middle of Little Slide Canyon.

At times it will be hard to see where you are going because the Hulk itself will not be in



Derek Lee prepares to make the turn off the trail towards Robinson Creek on the approach to the Incredible Hulk. Photo by Tad Hunt



Climbers on the Red Dihedral, the Incredible Hulk.
Photo by Pete Clark

view, but from here it is possible to follow a climber's trail all the way to the final talus field below the Hulk. The switchbacks eventually flatten and, after another few hundred yards, the trail ends in talus. Stay on the left (east) side of the canyon and follow the edge of the talus until you are forced into it. Follow a climber's trail through the talus, which leads to a creek crossing with a little footbridge. Cross this bridge and continue up the trail on the west (right) side of the creek, picking your way through talus until you reach the base of the Hulk.



The view from where you will leave the main trail. An aspen grove is just out of view to the right. Photo by Chris McNamara

Descent

There are two ways to get off the Hulk: a walk-off or a rap route. The walk-off is most convenient for routes that top out on the summit proper, such as the Red Dihedral and Falling Dihedral, whereas rappelling the Venturi Effect rap stations is more desirable for routes like Positive Vibes and Sunspot, since it prevents a tedious traverse to the summit.

Rap Route: You can rappel this route with a single 70 meter rope, but it just reaches with the full length of the rope, so knot your ends. From the top of Positive Vibes, walk about 10 feet along the ridgeline to the climber's right. The first rap station is composed of three stoppers, and heads down the Venturi Effect route. After this first anchor, all the remaining stations are bolted. The second rappel traverses far to the climber's left; it is helpful for the first person to place a directional to help guide towards the anchor. After the first four raps, the route joins with Positive Vibes. Rappel the first half of this route to the base.

Walk-off: This descent still requires one rappel, takes about 45 minutes to get from the summit to the base of the route, and another 2-3 hours to get back to Twin Lakes. Only one 50m or 60m rope is required for the one rappel on this descent. From the summit, downclimb the steep 3rd class on the south ridge (opposite direction of the climbing route) for about 300 feet to a rappel anchor (bolts and slings). It helps to locate the rappel

anchors when you are about 40 feet below the summit. Make an 80-foot rappel to the notch between two gullies: one leads to the north (toward Twin Lakes) one leads to the south (away from Twin Lakes). Take the south gully (the north gully is usually filled with ice and really dangerous). Downclimb 3rd class for a few hundred yards. When the gully opens up, stay left (staying right sends you over a steep cliff). Eventually gain the main talus and scree gully that wraps around to the base of the climbs. Reverse the approach.

If you need motivation for the descent, think of the burgers and fries that await at the trailhead grill (open until 9 p.m.).

Camping

Due to the long approach and the difficult nature of the climbs, many parties will want to bivvy near the base of the route. There is excellent camping at certain points along the approach next to the river, and there is a large flat area below Maltby Lake, just below the climbs. You will need a wilderness permit, available at the Bridgeport Ranger Station. There are also a few different campgrounds that are located near the trailhead.

The Hulk has seen increased popularity in recent years, receiving much more traffic and making it highly likely you will see other parties up there. This also means there have been larger numbers of people camping near

the base. It has reached the point where human waste is becoming a problem in this otherwise remote and pristine wilderness setting. Do the responsible thing and pack out your poop in an effort to keep this area nice, and to ensure that climbers can continue to have access to

this amazing peak. No one wants what has happened to the Whitney Zone access to be enforced over the entire Sierra, so it is up to us climbers to keep our own playgrounds clean.

Photo by Andy Bardon



Red Dihedral 5.10b ★★★★★

Time to climb route: 6-10 hours

Approach time: 3-4 hours

Descent time: 3-4 hours

Sun exposure: noon to sunset

Summit elevation: 11,120'

Height of route: 1,200'

Red Dihedral is the most moderate classic route on the Incredible Hulk but is still sustained and challenging (only one pitch is easier than 5.8). The rock is perfect, clean, golden granite and unlike most Sierra climbs, the route requires a fair amount of straight-in jamming technique (all the cruxes are on crack, not face). This is one of those few peaks that is much larger than it looks. From the base and approach, the upper pitches are not visible so when you get up on the climb it keeps going and going and going.

FA: Dale Bard, Mike Farrell, Bob Locke, 6/75.

History

Though the Incredible Hulk is a west-facing wall well-hidden from any road, it was the site of a fairly early Yosemite-esque wall climb in the High Sierra. In 1970 the trio of Greg Donaldson, Joe Kiskis, and Bob Grow spent a couple of days climbing through the center of the face. After completing the route at V, 5.8, A3 they made three rappels down the opposite side.

During the following years, the freeclimbing revolution took hold in Yosemite. Among the revolutionaries, Dale Bard was the first to make a steady diet of desperate 5.11 cracks. In

the spring of 1975, Bard took a ski tour that happened to run past “The Hulk,” and right away he knew it had spectacular free-climbing potential. In June, he organized two other Valley regulars to put aside their Tuolumne Meadows plans. They hiked into a campsite with an Italian motif to their banter, in honor of a group of Italian compatriots who had had a particularly tough season in Yosemite. Thus they knew themselves as “Dalessandro Bardini,” “Roberto Lockoni” (Bob Locke) and “Enzo Farrelli” (Mike Farrell).

Packing in a rack of only hexes and stoppers, the three headed for a prominent red corner, the rightmost of two on the wall. They swung leads, calling out in mock Italian as wave clouds formed over the Sierra. As they continued above the crux corner, winds began to buffet them. At one stance Bard was knocked off, but Farrelli grabbed him by the gear sling before he could take a nasty fall. They completed the first technical route to tag the summit, and descended in time to hike out. Locke was a well-read literature major, and he suggested that they name the route for Ygdrasil, the ash tree of ancient Nordic mythology that symbolizes the blossoming forces of life surrounded by the waters of death.

Editors Note: In spite of the first ascensionists wishes, over time the route became known as Red Dihedral. Since every current climber and guidebook refers to the route as Red Dihedral, we also do to avoid confusion.

– Andy Selters

Number of pitches by difficulty

Red Dihedral	Pitch	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Free Difficulty	>5.10				•			•					
	5.9		•	•		•	•		•	•			
	5.8	•										•	•
	5.7												
	5.6										•		
	<5.5												

Strategy

Most climbers do the climb car-to-car in one HUGE day. Get a predawn start and move fast. Descending from the summit (specifically, finding the rappel) is difficult and dangerous in the dark. If you are not confident in your hiking and climbing speed, then camp below the climb. The route is moderately popular—you may see two other parties or you may see no one. A 60m rope is not mandatory but lets you do the route in as few as eight pitches. The first half of the climb is sustained and follows major crack systems. The second half ascends more broken rock on easier terrain with the occasional 5.8 or 5.9 section. The line is distinct and easy to follow for the first four pitches. Pitch 2 is the only pitch on the climb that is difficult to protect.

Pitch 4, The Red Dihedral, is one of the more memorable pitches in the Sierra. Sustained hand jams lead to wild stemming moves through a bulge, followed by an airy traverse right on broken and steep 5.8. Some may want to bring extra cams in the 1-1.5" range. Save some bigger cams for the belay.

Above, the routefinding becomes more challenging so follow the topo closely and, when in doubt, climb straight up. There are many options for Pitches 7-10.

Once you reach the summit ridge (Belay 10) the rock quality deteriorates for the final pitch. It is crucial to walk over on 3rd class ledges to the obvious double cracks. At the top of the pitch, the wild tunnel through the chimney will be really hard with a pack. This is the only lame pitch on the climb, and you may need to break this into two pitches to avoid rope drag. Do not try to reach the summit by staying on the west face as the cracks become flared and bottoming.

Retreat

To retreat, rappel the route. It is easiest to retreat with two ropes, but it is possible to retreat with just one. Because there are no fixed belays on this climb, you will need to leave gear. High Sierra thunderstorms are common in the summer. Be sure to get the latest forecast before heading up on the route. The route can be exposed to very high winds making communication difficult.



Photo by Chris McNamara



The Budding Alpine Climber Ticklist

If you are just emerging into the alpine climbing realm, there are still plenty of worthy adventures to be had. Some of the most fun and classic climbs in the Sierra come with an easy rating. Below we have listed, in order, the easiest and most accessible peaks to help familiarize yourself with the area and the task of summiting technical alpine peaks. Work your way up this list, and you will be tackling more difficult challenges in no time.

- Tenaya Peak, Northwest Buttress 5.5 ★★★★★ page 185
- Cathedral Peak, Southeast Buttress 5.6 ★★★★★ page 169
- Laurel Mountain, Northeast Gully 5.2 ★★★ page 147
- Mt. Emerson, Southeast Face 5.4 ★★★★★ page 113
- Crystal Crag, North Arête 5.7 ★★★ page 151
- Petite Griffon, Southeast Face 5.7 ★★★★★ page 140
- Mt. Sill, Swiss Arête 5.7 ★★★★★ page 94

Sierra Snow Climbs

For those who seek out mountain adventures even in winter, there are several fun climbs up snow and ice. Some routes, such as the Mountaineer's route, can be a rocky talus climb in summer, but in spring or fall can be a low-angle ascent best done with a tool and crampons.

- Mt. Whitney, Mountaineer's Route 3rd Class ★★ page 50
- Mt. Ritter, Southeast Glacier Route 3rd Class ★★★ page 161
- North Peak, Northeast Couloir, AI2, 4th class ★★★★★ page 203
- North Palisade, U Notch AI2, 4th Class ★★★ page 98

The Sierra Hardman/woman Ticklist

Maybe alpine climbing is old news to you – been there, done that, complete with spray on the internet. But have you proven yourself on the hardest gems in the Sierra? If you've already checked these routes off, then step it up and do them all car-to-car in a day...

- Cardinal Pinnacle, West Face 5.10a ★★★★★ page 107
- Clyde Minaret, Southeast Face (Direct Start) 5.10 ★★★★★ page 155
- Mt. Russell, Mithral Dihedral 5.10a ★★★★★ page 63
- Temple Crag, Sun Ribbon Arête 5.10a ★★★★★ page 85
- Third Pillar of Dana, Regular Route 5.10b ★★★★★ page 165
- Incredible Hulk, Red Dihedral 5.10b ★★★★★ page 223
- Merriam Peak, North Buttress 5.10b ★★★★★ page 125
- Keeler Needle, Harding Route 5.10c ★★★★★ page 52
- Temple Crag, Dark Star 5.10c ★★★★★ page 89
- Incredible Hulk, Positive Vibrations 5.11a ★★★★★ page 219
- Incredible Hulk, Sunspot Dihedral 5.11b ★★★★★ page 215

Impressive Link-ups

A fun Sierra challenge for fast moving parties is to complete link-ups of technical climbs. Usually this involves soloing either large portions or entire routes in order to complete the objective in one day. Here are a few worthy accomplishments that combine climbs we cover in this book:

- Mt. Whitney** (East Face and East Buttress, descending Mountaineer's Route twice)
- Mt. Russell** (Fishhook Arête and Mithral Dihedral. Even better: descend the East Ridge afterwards.)
- Triple Crown** (Tenaya Peak, Full Matthes Crest, & Cathedral Peak)
- North Peak - Mt. Conness - Mt. Conness** (North Peak to Conness North Ridge to Conness West Ridge)

Climbs by Rating

- Mt. Russell, East Ridge 3rd class ★★★★★ page 66
- Mt. Whitney, Mountaineer's Route 3rd Class ★★ page 50
- Mt. Ritter, Southeast Glacier Route 3rd Class ★★★ page 161
- North Peak, Northeast Couloir, AI2, 4th class ★★★★★ page 203
- North Palisade, U Notch AI2, 4th Class ★★★ page 98
- Laurel Mountain, Northeast Gully 5.2 ★★★ page 147
- Mt. Emerson, Southeast Face 5.4 ★★★★★ page 113
- Bear Creek Spire, Northeast Ridge 5.5 ★★★★★ page 136
- Tenaya Peak, Northwest Buttress 5.5 ★★★★★ page 185
- Lone Pine Peak, North Ridge 5.5 ★★★ page 29
- Mt. Humphreys, East Arête 5.5 ★★★★★ page 118
- Cathedral Peak, Southeast Buttress 5.6 ★★★★★ page 169
- Mt. Conness, West Ridge 5.6 ★★★★★ page 190
- Mt. Conness, North Ridge 5.6 ★★★★★ page 199
- Crystal Crag, North Arête 5.7 ★★★ page 151
- Matterhorn Peak, North Arête 5.7 ★★★ page 207
- Matthes Crest, Traverse from South to North 5.7 ★★★★★ page 179
- Mt. Whitney, East Buttress 5.7 ★★★★★ page 47
- Mt. Whitney, East Face 5.7 ★★★★★ page 41
- Petite Griffon, Southeast Face 5.7 ★★★★★ page 140
- Mt. Sill, Swiss Arête 5.7 ★★★★★ page 94
- Temple Crag, Venusian Blind 5.7 ★★★★★ page 79
- Temple Crag, Moon Goddess Arête 5.8 ★★★★★ page 82
- Charlotte Dome, South Face 5.8 ★★★★★ page 71
- Bear Creek Spire, North Arête 5.8 ★★★★★ page 133
- Clyde Minaret, Southeast Face 5.8 ★★★★★ page 155
- Eichorn's Pinnacle, West Pillar 5.9 ★★★ page 174
- Mt. Russell, Fishhook Arête 5.9 ★★★★★ page 59
- Mt. Goode, North Buttress 5.9 ★★★ page 104
- Cardinal Pinnacle, West Face 5.10a ★★★★★ page 107
- Incredible Hulk, Falling Dihedral 5.10a ★★★ page 227
- Mt. Russell, Mithral Dihedral 5.10a ★★★★★ page 63
- Temple Crag, Sun Ribbon Arête 5.10a ★★★★★ page 85
- Third Pillar of Dana, Regular Route 5.10b ★★★★★ page 165
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- Mt. Conness, Southwest Face 5.10c ★★★★★ page 193
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- Mt. Goode, North Buttress 5.9 ★★★ page 104
- Mt. Humphreys, East Arête 5.5 ★★★★★ page 118
- Mt. Ritter, Southeast Glacier Route 3rd Class ★★★ page 161
- Mt. Russell, East Ridge 3rd class ★★★★★ page 66
- Mt. Russell, Fishhook Arête 5.9 ★★★★★ page 59
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- North Palisade, U Notch AI2, 4th Class ★★★ page 98
- North Peak, Northeast Couloir, AI2, 4th class ★★★★★ page 203
- Petite Griffon, Southeast Face 5.7 ★★★★★ page 140
- Tenaya Peak, Northwest Buttress 5.5 ★★★★★ page 185
- Temple Crag, Dark Star 5.10c ★★★ page 89
- Temple Crag, Sun Ribbon Arête 5.10a ★★★★★ page 85
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- Temple Crag, Venusian Blind 5.7 ★★★★★ page 79
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