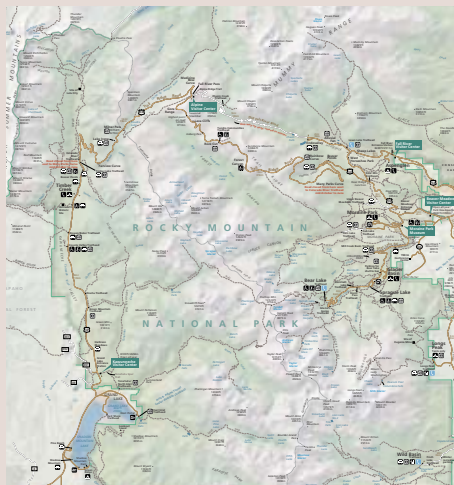


Klettergarden





**Caroline George on the 5.7 fifth pitch
of the Culp-Bossier (III 5.8), Hallett Peak,
Rocky Mountain National Park.**

WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN I MENTION ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK (RMNP)? Probably the Diamond of Longs Peak, that 1,000-foot granite plaque capping an ominous east-facing cirque. Or maybe Hallett Peak and the clusters of V-hard boulderers sessioning the talus at its base. Or tourists filming bored, overstuffed elk from their RV windows, and then flocking into Estes Park for ice cream and rubber tomahawks. You probably don't think of classic alpine cruiser routes, though.

Climbers have been putting up multi-pitch lines here since 1927, when Paul and Joe Stettner established *Stettner's Ledges* (II 5.7+) up the east face of Longs. And RMNP boasts more than its fair share of bloody-hard multi-pitch climbs, like *Birds of Fire* (IV 5.11a), *Baloney Pony* (II 5.12c), and *The Honey-moon is Over* (V 5.13c). But the Park's acclaim, besides the saintly setting, is its preponderance of quintessentially alpine sub-5.10 routes, offering steep rock up dramatic corners and

ridges just backcountry enough to make you earn your beer.

The following classics combine long approaches (two to six miles) with steep hillsides, butt-kicking scree fields, teetering talus, brushy willows, and, of course, exposure and altitude. (None of the trailheads sits below 9,000 feet, and these summits all spike above 12,000 feet.) The Continental Divide, in fact, splits RMNP down its center and forms climber-perfect, with steep east faces dropping off the great spine. This geological wonder, however, also has a downside: the broiling clouds that appear each summer afternoon. Time it right, and you'll arrive at your car sun baked and bleary eyed, having enjoyed the simple pleasure of navigating curious throngs of hikers, fudge eaters, and enamored elk spotters on your return. Catch it wrong, however, and you'll end up shivering under a granite lip, wondering just how well granite, lightning, and metal get along.

Spearhead

North Ridge (III 5.6)



Enjoying some of the Park's finest granite, Majka Burhardt chooses her own adventure along the *North Ridge* of Spearhead.

PERCHED AT THE TOP of Glacier Gorge, Spearhead (12,575 feet) has some of the best granite in the Park. Pete Soby and Charles Schobinger put up the *North Ridge* in 1958, the same year *Sykes Sickle* (III 5.9+) was established on the northeast face. Both climbers likely fell in love with the morning sun glimmering silver on the northeast-facing slab apron, which today hosts more than a dozen killer routes up to 5.12-. You have to earn this sight, however, as Spearhead hides until the final mile of the approach, a five-plus-mile hike that would seem never-ending if not for its stunning diversity — Mills Lake's flattened plateau, the granite-ensconced pocket of Black Lake, and the improbable eastern channel that shoots you to the upper cirque, where you navigate talus, tundra, and elk turds to the base of the route.

Called "The Pinnacle" by hikers in 1910, Spearhead, dwarfed by neighboring Longs Peak and Chief's Head, is often taken lightly. The *North Ridge* itself sometimes lures climbers rightward into a vast land of scalloping blocks and hollow boulders. One friend launched a dining-room-table-sized chunk of rock down on her partner, only to have it cleave into a more manageable briefcase that pummeled his leg. And Spearhead also sits in a "prime" weather position: a client, from the South, once told me just how much she enjoyed watching the gorgeous clouds "growing just so darn fast" over her right shoulder. One hour later, those same clouds spewed horizontal rain and nuclear-blast-strength wind, though we did make it safely back to our packs.

The *North Ridge* stretches eight pitches, with the final three creeping along the double-exposed arête that forms the right edge of the spear tip. Start carefully, aiming for slabs just left of a pronounced chimney on the northeast corner of the face. From here, create your own route, following a variety of dihedrals and choosing from innumerable belay ledges.

The 5.6 rating is accurate, though full on. Fortunately, much of the climb is ledgy and blocky... hence easier. Still, heads up for loose rock and the sucker variations leading to climber's right — instead, stick close to the crest and save some mojo for the crux, an awkward left-leaning corner that hangs over the east face for the final ropelength.

Petit Grepon

South Face (III 5.8)



Nan Darkis on the 5.7 final headwall of the Petit Grepon.

FOR SUCH A FAMOUS and over-traveled climb (ever read *Fifty Classic Climbs?*), the Petit has a murky history. The north face of the spire is a mere 100-foot wall and was likely climbed in the 1950s with little fanfare. The 800-foot south face, however, wasn't climbed until 1961, when Bill Buckingham and Art Davidson did a variant along its left edge. But no one re-

ally knows who put up what would later become *the* classic.

The crown jewel of the Cathedral Spires, the Petit (12,100 feet) is regally situated, with a concave southern headwall towering over Sky Pond. Its neighbors — Sharkstooth, the Saber, and the Foil — are fantastic, too, but none have the grand finale of the Petit: a 10-by-30-foot sum-

The climb starts with 5.5 face and chimney climbing, but the first true hurdle comes on the third pitch, a jagged 5.7 scar that gobbles gear. Easier climbing sets up the 5.8 crux above: a thinner crack with stemming and perfect pockets, and slightly tricky pro. The final pitches wrap around the southeast face. Be warned: up yonder, the sheer verticality of the route suddenly makes mere 5.7 seem wild and unpredictable. If you summit with your gear, rap north into the Gash, making a long (read: nasty) slog down scree and talus to the Andrews Glacier Trail. Otherwise, follow bolted rappels on the climber's right; use two 60m ropes and *carefully* scramble between the stations. This will land you where you started, just in time for a dip in Sky Pond.

mit plank, preceded by eight pitches of fantastic crack climbing. The three-hour approach weaves around striking lakes — Loch Vale, Glass Lake, and Sky Pond — oblong pockets of crystalline blue where you'll occasionally see a lone fisherman casting for trout in the placid morning waters.

The Saber

Southwest Corner (III 5.10a)



THE REDHEADED STEPCHILD of the Cathedral Spires (above), the Saber is still not to be missed — especially if you want to avoid the Petit's crowds. In fact, since they share the same approach, you can always turn your attention — and your feet — east, toward the Saber. Here, the *Southwest Corner* is the cleanest choice, and many would argue even easier than the “5.8+” *Kor Route* to its right. The

six-pitch *Southwest Corner* starts with clean left-facing dihedrals and straight-up cracks, and finishes on a gravity-defying vertical corner that splits the southwest face. The first time I climbed the route I'd become so absorbed in the perfect upper pitches that I forgot about the parties next door on the Petit.

“F—k me!” I yelled to my partner, another woman. “You're not going to believe it up here.”

“No, f—k *me!*” echoed a male voice, seemingly right in my ear. (*Whoops.*)

As it turns out, you can have an entire conversation across the narrow chasm separating the Chamonix-like aiguilles. You can even ask someone out (and get turned down)... without raising your voice.

From 1957 to 1967, the legendary Layton Kor, known for prolific new-routing, bold leads, and fast driving, put up RMNP routes with astonishing alacrity. “Every time I went into the Park, I would have a fistful of other lines to try next time — all before I was done with the route I was on in the first place,” says Kor. The list is long: the second ascent of the Diamond, and first ascents of *Yellow Wall*, *Jack of Diamonds*, the *Diagonal*, Sharkstooth, Chief's Head, and the Saber. “Back then, there were so many prizes to pick, you couldn't help but do a first ascent,” Kor told me, before asking how many established lines I thought the Cathedral Spires held. “Around 30,” I answered. He was quiet for a moment, and then piped up: “So that means there's still more to do, right?”

Ypsilon Mountain

Blitzen Ridge (III 5.4)



Andrew Councill *Blitzen* around the third Ace on Mount Ypsilon.

EVERYONE WANTS TO HAVE DONE the remote Blitzen Ridge, but few actually want to do it. Despite Blitzen's prominence as the largest peak on the Park's northern skyline, the Y-Couloir — a snow route up the east face — and Blitzen combined likely see few ascents each year. By the time you arrive at the Spectacle Lakes you'll understand why: Ypsilon's nordwand is, as put so aptly by the longtime Estes local Steve Komito, a wall "more impressive to look at than to touch."

The 13,514-foot peak itself, nestled

deep in the Mummy Range, on the northern edge of RMNP, demands commitment and fitness just to reach the base. If you get lost hereabouts, you're not likely to be found quickly. In 2005, the ranger Jeff Christensen disappeared off the back of Ypsilon on a solo patrol; his body was recovered a week later. In the 1940s, another unlucky hiker came too close to the edge and slid down the entire north face; rumors of a grave at the base of the nordwand circulate among the faithful, though few have found it.

Blitzen's approach is six miles, but feels even longer due to the peak's isolation. Don't, however, be fooled by the grade — this is *alpine* 5.4. There is no way out but up, or, rather, sideways. This mile-long ridge — on sometimes-iffy rock — is not a good intro to the Park, but rather a good tick once you've earned your lungs, legs, and RMNP chops.

Begin by navigating around, up, and over the Aces — the triangular gendarmes that split the ridge — usually best accomplished with short pitches. After you puzzle through the ledge systems and occasional cracks, the climbing eases and the scrambling begins. The last 1,000 feet — fourth class mixed with a few bouldery sections of fifth — force a casual pace. Check out the nine alpine lakes glistening below, or the Never Summer Range stretching north toward Wyoming. If you hit *Blitzen* right, in late summer, you can catch the tundra changing to red, and aspen trees to gold. Add the gray and black granite, and crystalline blue lakes, and you have a visual, vertical playground.

Burhardt keeps tight to *Blitzen* Ridge proper.



Hallett Peak

Culp-Bossier (III 5.8)



George playing nice on Hallett gneiss, pitch 2, *Culp-Bossier*.

DON'T BE FOOLED — and don't get into an argument — with the locals who call Hallett Peak “Hallett’s” Peak. They’re talking about the same thing, regardless of the drunken pluralization that goes on at Ed’s Cantina. By any name, Hallett is a Park anomaly — a short approach (two miles), gneiss, and north facing. It’s also one of the best alpine “crag” around. Though hardcore locals romp up (and down) the buttress in a few hours, first timers will find a Hallett ascent surprisingly intricate. Your backdrop is Emerald Lake and its ever-fluctuating spectrum of greens — from Kelly, to forest, to evergreen, and back to its namesake, as the wind bar-

rels off the Continental Divide, dragging clouds across the sun and whipping up wavelets of psychedelic algae.

The seven-pitch *Northcutt-Carter* used to be the preferred route up the 800-foot face, but after a quarter of it cleaved off in 2000, turning what had been a *Fifty Classics* 5.7 into 5.10+ X, the race was on for a new favorite. Enter the *Culp-Bossier*.



Tossing ropes for the Hallett rappel.

The eight-pitch *Culp-Bossier* leads as one of the most sustained 5.8s in RMNP. It’s also a well-earned route; many have bailed trying to find the vague dihedrals that link its blanker face sections, hence the teeming, tantalizing (but off-route) bail webbing. Spicy for the grade (as all routes on Hallett are), the *Culp-Bossier* demands a strong head and creative gear skills for the more nebulous stretches. After you top out amongst boulders, a short hike down the peak’s broad eastern ridge, two rappels, a bit of fourth class, and a scree-filled gully take you quickly back to your pack. If you catch a rare storm-free day, you could even do two Hallett climbs (try the *Love Route* next)... or, better yet, beat the crowds to the bar.

Notch Top Mountain

South Ridge (III 5.8)

THOUGH SMALLER THAN OTHER WALLS in the Park, Notch Top has played an important role in RMNP history. The Diamond legend Roger Briggs considers his first free ascent of *White Room* (freed at 5.11 R/X) to be the touchstone for a new style, one that led to Diamond masterpieces like *Ariana* (IV 5.12a) and *King of Swords* (V 5.12a R). Previous to his Notch Top ascent, he'd approached peaks with bivy gear and a sack full of pitons. In 1973, Briggs climbed *White Room* with only a rack of nuts; it was a perfect place to start his new "fast-and-light" ethic. Climbers today use Notch Top as a similar stepping-stone. But don't be fooled: the six-pitch *South Ridge* is committing, with no fixed anchors.

For a long time, the descent was one of the more storied in the Park, with countless climbers attempting the "mountaineering" walk-off only to get cliffed out and benighted. Local climbers and guides, tired of heading into the hills for rescues, bolted a rappel line off the west face. Use it.

Notch Top is not as airy as the Petit, as remote as *Blizten*, or as storied as *Spearhead*, but it does have damn good stone. The *South Ridge* is the highest-quality moderate line up the face, offering plenty of variations from 5.9 to 5.10+. If you keep to the true route, flip-flopping between golden arêtes and sinker cracks, you won't be disappointed.

Burhardt and George tackling a direct start, at 5.8, to Notch Top's fabulous *South Ridge*.



Longs Peak

Keyhole Ridge (III 5.5)



Longs Peak's Keyhole proper: climbers go left, hikers go right.

LONGS PEAK TOWERS 14,255 FEET above sea level. Most climbers think of Longs in extremes — as a 15-mile roundtrip walk-up, via the Keyhole, or as the steepest and hardest technical rock face in the state, via the Diamond. At 5.5, the *Keyhole Ridge* splits the difference. The super-fine granite is just like that of the Diamond, and the large towers and corners impart an other-worldly feel.

On a busy day, the Longs Peak trailhead can feel more like Disney World than the mountains, replete with Donald and Goofy wearing jeans and sweat-shirts, carrying canteens and three-pound Maglites, and sporting fanny packs crammed with trusty plastic-poncho/human-kite set-ups. Google the Keyhole route and you'll understand why — more than 19,000 sites give tree-by-boulder-by-bush descriptions of Longs' trade route. Interspersed in the madness (and contributing to it) stride climbers sheathed in black Schoeller, making their Diamond pilgrimages. Fortunately, on the *Keyhole Ridge* you ditch the crowds at the Keyhole itself, a giant window between the mountain's east and west facets.

Options abound on the *Keyhole Ridge*. Start by finding the cleanest line from the Keyhole to the ridge proper — depending on where you ascend, you'll face 100 to 200 feet of fifth class. Once on top, it's worth a quick drop over the other side to grab a bird's-eye view of Pagoda Peak's rocky ridgeline and Chief's Head's sheer walls.

As the altitude jumps, a few technical steps and cracks keep things interesting. Steer up and left along the northeast face, keeping the climbing at 5.5. Breathe steadily along as the climbing eases, and follow fourth-class terrain to the football-field-sized summit. Prepare a good "war story" to share with the hikers on the way back. Remember: from where they sit, you've walked in from the edge of the world, which, I suppose, is exactly right.

Guide Services

- Colorado Mountain School: totalclimbing.com, 800.836.4008

Shops

- Trail Ridge Outfitters: 888.586.4595
- Estes Park Mountain Shop: 866.303.6548

Guidebooks and Web Resources

- *Rocky Mountain National Park, the Climbers Guide, High Peaks*, by Bernard Gillett
- *Rocky Mountain National Park: The High Peaks*, by Richard Rossiter
- mountainproject.com

Estes Park Hot Spots

- Ed's Cantina — local bar and favorite climber hangout: 970.586.2919
- Climber's Lodge — bunkhouse and showers: 800.836.4008

Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt has guided and climbed most of the routes in this article more times than she can remember. Still, she gladly does them whenever the chance arises.