## EYE ON THE NEEDLES

SEQUOIA NATIONAL FOREST, CALIFORNIA

PHOTOS BY BERND ZEUGSWETTER

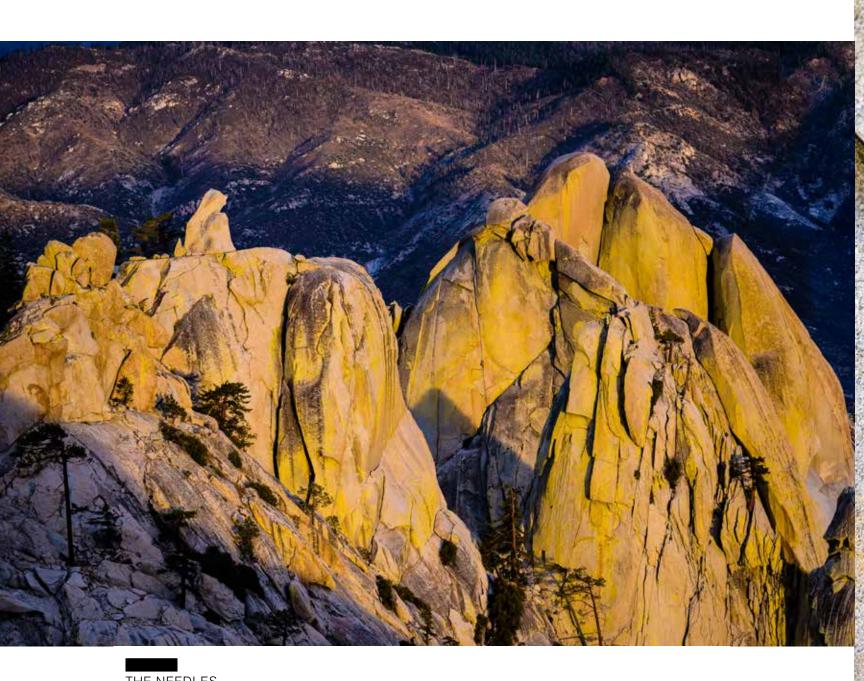
TEXT BY RANDY LEAVITT

PYROMANIA (5.13a/b)

When, in the early 1980s, Tony Yaniro attempted to free the splitter of *Pyromania*, I was blown away by how difficult the climbing looked from my belay. Yet the route went free, and was well within Tony's range. He climbed it in style, too. Each time he fell he lowered and cleaned his gear, a departure from today where most hard cracks sprout pre-placed pro and feature an R or X for serious fall potential. When Tony slotted his little hexes (museum pieces today) behind the flake, he didn't give long falls a thought, and just ran it out. In this photo, Josh Janes plugs and guns up this Needles testpiece.







## THE NEEDLES

The Needles are one of the most stunning climbing areas in the United States. From a distance, the granite spires look impossible to climb, but close up, move-by-move, they keep delivering holds and cracks. Don't be deceived by the close proximity of the spires, either. The terrain between the formations is surprisingly hard to negotiate. Because of this, most climbers accomplish fewer pitches than they plan, but have a better time than they could have imagined.







Romantic Warnor is the crown jewel of the Needles. It has enjoyable technical movement, splitter rock and singularity of line on a grand scale—it tackles nine pitches up the southwest face of the Warlock.

When Tony Yaniro and I did the first free ascent in 1983 (wearing E.B.s!), we took obvious finger cracks on pitches four and five, bypassing the RURP crack that splits off of pitch

Exposed, long and slippery, Romantic Warrior requires endurance and attention to every detail. The stem, lieback and body English moves on pitch seven are especially grim, and it is mind-boggling to imagine that RW has been free soloed by Alex Honnold and Michael Reardon. Reardon's ropeless ascent in 2005 was reportedly ground-up, onsight, a feat that even Honnold, the boldest and best soloist in

Reardon's solo was so ahead of its time it was unbelievable for some climbers, and whether he really pulled it off may never be known. He died two years later when an ocean surge pulled him from the base of an Irish sea cliff into the cold currents of the north Atlantic Ocean. His body was never found.

SCIROCCO (5.11d)

The windy conditions formed by the Venturi effect of the closely spaced spires inspired the name *Scirocco* for this Needles beauty. Most climbers redpoint the first pitch (5.11d crimpy face), then call it a day. This ropelength usually taxes people more than they expect for the grade, so they are happy to bail at the first anchor.

Scirocco was established ground up, in the accepted lead-bolting style of the day. With one twist. The keepers-of-the-style believed that bolts should only be placed from freeclimbing stances, but Tony knew that to bolt this steep face and arête he'd have to hang from hooks. This worked until the arête on the second pitch, which wouldn't hold Tony's storebought hooks, so he made custom ones from rebar. These, sometimes used in opposition, gripped the arête's sloping edges and let him continue his work. Brett Mauer, who accompanied Tony, marveled at his hook shenanigans. I joined the team for the final FA push and was impressed by how futuristic the route was. Tony recalls how Mike Lechlinsky, who was a bad-ass ground-up run-it-out kind of John-Bachar activist at the Needles (with his own growing lists of bold first ascents such as Terrorvision), called him to criticize him for placing too many bolts.

Tony told Lechilinsky that he could, "chop any bolts you don't clip when you do the route."

No bolts were ever removed, but power drillers probably added some in the following years. This arête is action packed 5.12 climbing, complete with committing barndoor liebacking and toe hooking. *Scirocco* will test your game, and you will understand why it is one of Tony's favorite routes at the Needles. Photographer Bernd Zeugswetter confirms the quality of the first pitch in this photo.

