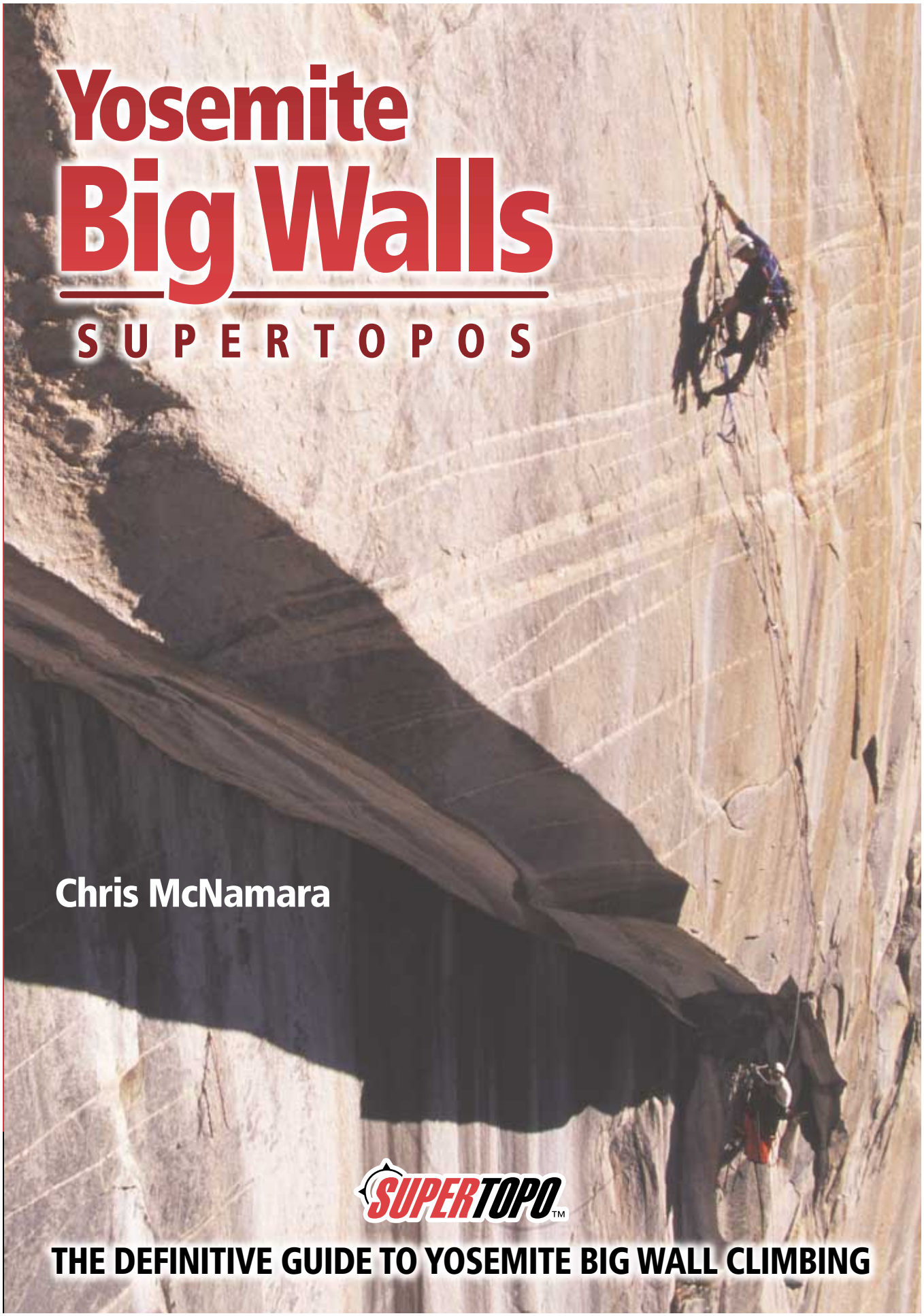
Yosemite Big Walls

SUPERTOPOS



Chris McNamara

SUPERTOPO™

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO YOSEMITE BIG WALL CLIMBING

Contents

Preface

Welcome to Yosemite Big Walls SuperTopos. This new approach to climbing guides came about because of a need and a surprise.

The need was for up-to-date, accurate topos. When I climbed all the routes in this book I was often frustrated by the lack of good beta. Phoning other climbers and hanging out at the Mountain Room Bar filled some holes, but I often found that many routes had evolved into something quite different than what was set forth in older guidebooks. A great time on an ultra classic route can be soured by not knowing how to prepare. Worse yet is not being able to get off in good shape because of a poor route description. Personally, I want precise information so that I can focus on the climbing, not on whether I am off route. So what I aimed for are Supertopos, the most detailed and informative climbing topos ever published.

Look for three key features on a Supertopo:

- Detailed topo: pitch lengths, gear sizes, beta, beta, beta
- Strategy and general information about the route
- Detailed approach and descent maps

My surprise was finding how many unwritten great stories there were about Yosemite's classic climbs. I started out making a few phone calls to bolster the SuperTopos and quickly realized that I had uncovered a gold mine of climbing lore. So I hit the phones in earnest, making more than 200 calls to track down first ascentionists and wound up with more than 40 interviews.

Many of the route histories have been documented in more detail than this guide can provide in Steve Roper's excellent book, *Camp 4.* However, there is a large gap in Yosemite's history between 1970 and the present. Whether recent climbers were more modest or just lazier, they rarely submitted articles to major publications. So what started as my modest fact-finding mission has yielded some of the first written accounts for many of these climbs. The process exponentially increased the workload of this book and delayed it for several months, but it was a powerful treat to hear the first ascent stories of the pioneers of these spectacular climbs. I hope you enjoy reading these histories as much as I enjoyed researching and writing them.

A companion to this book is the web site **www. supertopo.com**. This site features the latest information on the routes, big wall technique tips, ordering information for the book and a gallery of photos from the routes.

I have tried hard to screen out errors from the thousands of bits of information in this guide, showing early drafts to fellow climbers for their input. But I know that some mistakes unavoidably crept in due to human error. Let me know when you come across a mistake and I will make an appropriate correction on the web site and in the next edition of this book.

I have used the current names of routes and features to avoid confusion, even though many of them originally had different names. For example, Wino Tower was originally Wine Tower and Anchorage Ledge was Anchorite Ledge.

Climbing is a great sport; I hope this guide makes it even better for you.

Chris McNamara
Mill Valley, California
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P.S.: The next Supertopo books are already in the works. Look for them soon.

SuperTopo Mission

- **Help climbers ascend and descend routes quickly, efficiently, and safely by creating the most accurate and informative climbing topos ever published.**
- **Advocate routes that follow natural lines while discouraging routes that are heavily bolted, enhanced or unsustainable.**
- **Capture the mystery, adventure and humor of climbing by publishing the histories, anecdotes and outrageous stories of each route.**
- **Promote hammerless climbing by publishing the most up to date rack info as well as hammerless ratings for each pitch.**
- **Stress the importance of climbing in good style and promote stewardship of the environment.**

Visit SuperTopo.com

Throughout this book you'll notice, "For the latest route information, visit www.supertopo.com." Our website is the definitive resource for the latest SuperTopos—including expanded and updated detail on every route in this book and many more routes. The SuperTopo website includes:

- The latest info on every route in this book and many more
- Color SuperTopos and color photos, formatted for printing on your inkjet or laser printer
- Detailed pitch-by-pitch climbing info and photos for many climbs
- Additional SuperTopo products such as our **Climber's Dream-trip Series**—selections of climbs in Yosemite and other great climbing areas in North America. Examples include:

  The Road to the Nose A series of climbs to help you prepare for your first attempt on The Nose. SuperTopos are included for each route as well as an overview written by Chris McNamara offering guidance on how to prepare for The Nose. This package also includes gear recommendations and contact information for climbing guides and instructional courses in Yosemite.

  In the Footsteps of Legends Repeat the great climbs of Yosemite heroes such as Warren Harding, Tom Frost, Royal Robbins and more by following the SuperTopos in this series. In addition to expanded climbing beta you'll also find enhanced route histories in this series.

  Ultimate Roadtrip Series A series of roadtrip itineraries including all the required SuperTopos and beta to introduce you to the best climbs as you visit the most awesome climbing areas.

A lot of information on our website is available completely free of charge—including free SuperTopos on the most classic Yosemite routes. Check it out. We hope you'll also take time to check out our download-able SuperTopo products, such as the Climber's Dream-trips above, available for online purchase.

Visit www.supertopo.com before your next climb. The best and most current info on the route you are planning to climb is probably waiting for you there. Heck, visit us right now.

Chris McNamara on Pitch 22 of the Shield on his way to an ascent time of 10:58. Photo by Corey Rich.

Introduction

Welcome to big wall paradise. In Yosemite Valley stand some of the most exquisite rock formations on the planet. Enjoy.

Getting There

The closest international airports to Yosemite are either Oakland International or San Francisco International. The Oakland airport is preferable as it is less chaotic, easier to get around and closer to the valley.

Many people stay in Yosemite without a car. It is possible to reach most climbing areas by a free shuttle bus. Note that the shuttle does not serve areas west of Camp 4, including El Capitan, Leaning Tower, Cookie Cliff and Arch Rock. To reach these areas without a car you will need to hitchhike or ride a bike.

Driving times and distances to Yosemite Valley

From	Time (hours)	Distance (miles)
Boulder, CO*	20:00	1,254
Fresno, CA	2:20	90
Truckee, CA	4:00	240
Los Angeles, CA	6:00	311
Mammoth, CA*	2:30	95
Oakland, CA	4:00	172
Sacramento, CA	4:00	174
Salt Lake City, UT*	12:00	707
San Francisco, CA	4:30	192
Tuolumne Meadows, CA	1:30	60

*Driving times are 2–4 hours longer when Tioga pass is closed, usually from November to May.

When to Climb

Yosemite has the best weather of any big wall climbing area on earth. That said, note that it could storm at any time in Yosemite, and often heavily. Climbers should always prepare for the worst on a multi-day big wall by bringing adequate bivy gear (see Staying Alive, page 22). The best times to climb are in the spring and fall. The summer can also be great once you get a few pitches up and out of the heat. In the winter, the valley empties of both tourists and climbers, giving a much more pristine feel to the climbs. Winter can have good climbing weather but can also have months of uniquely wet and severe Sierra storms. The effects of these storms are made clear in the story on page 24 of the two Japanese who died climbing the Nose. Road and weather reports can be found on the Internet sites listed in the appendix or by calling (**209**) **372-0200**.

General weather and crowd trends in Yosemite Valley

Nov 15–March The walls and valley are relatively empty with usually at least one five-day spell of good weather per month. During a mild winter one to two weeks of great weather per month are common. On any winter ascent prepare for the absolute worst, as Pacific storms can last up to a week or longer and bring heavy snow and rain.

April–May 15 Walls and the valley are still uncrowded but there is a 50/50 chance of getting either good or miserable weather. This is also the time of some of the wettest Pacific storms.

May 15–June Perfect weather and big crowds both in the valley and on the walls.

July–Aug The valley is still crowed with tourists, but walls are uncrowded. While valley floor temperatures are often in the 90s and 100s, temperatures on the walls 500 feet above the valley or higher are usually comfortable in the 70s and low 80s. Still, be prepared with plenty of extra water.

Sept–Nov 15 The valley is crowded with tourists and walls are crowded. Mostly cooler weather with an occasional heat wave. The first winter storm usually arrives in late October or early November.

Month	Average precipitation	Max/min temp in degrees F
January	6.35"	47/25
February	6.64"	55/26
March	5.87"	58/30
April	3.29"	65/34
May	1.48"	71/39
June	.51"	80/46
July	.29"	89/50
August	.06"	89/50
September	.55"	82/48
October	1.68"	72/39
November	3.49"	57/30
December	7.1"	49/26

Staying in the Park

Yosemite Valley is a small city. The bad news is that the many buildings, restaurants, stores and motel-like rooms take away from the natural beauty of the park. The good news is that these same things make the valley damn accommodating. You will find restaurants, groceries, climbing gear, a medical clinic, motels, swimming pools, rafts, bike rentals and, if you find yourself in an unfortunate situation, a jail.

Camping

Camp 4 is the historical center of American climbing. It is also the only walk-in campground and the cheapest place to stay. No reservations are required but during peak season (May–October) expect a long wait to secure a campsite. The cost is $4 per person per night with a 14-day limit on your stay.

Call **(800) 436-PARK** to make reservations for other sites.

Note: The Valley camping may change by the time you read this book. Contact the park for the latest camping information before making plans.

Food

Groceries are available in the valley at the Village Store, Curry Village Store or Lodge Store. It is much cheaper to buy groceries in Oakdale, Merced or Oakhurst on the drive to Yosemite. There are a variety of restaurants in the valley that serve food, including pizza, deli sandwiches, ice cream and an all-you-can-eat buffet. Information on these areas is available in the valley.

Showers

Showers cost $2 (towel included) and are available at Housekeeping or Curry Village.

Climbing Gear

The Mountain Shop **(209) 372-8396**, located in Curry Village, offers at reasonable prices a selection of portaledges, haulbags and just about every piece of gear you will need on a big wall. There are also a variety of climbing shops in the Bay Area. In San Francisco: Mission Cliffs and The North Face. In Berkeley: REI, Wilderness Exchange and Marmot Mountain Works.

Bears

In Yosemite the bears occupy a position on the food chain higher than humans do. If you doubt it, take a look at a car or a campsite trashed by a bear out shopping for edibles. In 1998, property damage caused by bears exceeded $630,000 and more than 1,100 vehicles were broken into. Bears have damaged cars for as little as a stick of gum or an empty soda can. If you want what's yours to remain yours, remember three things about bears: they are hungry, smart and strong.

When bears smell food, even if it's locked in your trunk or glove compartment, they shift into high gear. They get turned on by odors of containers that used to contain food but do no longer. They even go for toothpaste and sunscreen. Bears don't need to smell food; they see something like a grocery bag or an ice chest, and associate it with food. In fact, they don't even need to see that much. If a bear sees clutter inside a car, he'll think, "I wonder what's under all that stuff?" and go to work.

Breaking into a car is a trivial exercise for a

bear. He inserts his claws at the top of the door frame and pulls down. Then he climbs in and trashes the car. Some bears have even learned to jump up and down on the roof of vans to pop the doors open. Yosemite veterans claim that bears have taught each other not only how to open cars, but which makes and models are easiest to crack.

You can't outsmart or outmuscle a bear. Unless you are on a wall (and bears have been known to poach there, too), stash your food in one of the bear-proof storage lockers provided by the Park Service.

Anchor Conditions

Since 1997 the American Safe Climbing Association has replaced more than 800 bolts on Yosemite's big walls. Many trade routes have bomber belays and some have bomber lead bolts as well. The ASCA is working to replace the remaining bad bolts in Yosemite but many poor bolts remain. On all but the well-traveled trade routes, it is the climber's responsibility to know how to properly replace a belay or lead bolt.

Under "Strategy" in each of the following route descriptions a general overview of the route's anchor conditions is given. Keep in mind that this information may be out of date by the time you do the route. For the most up-to-date information on each route's anchors conditions, visit the ASCA web site at **www.safeclimbing.org**. Also, please see Wall Tips, page 144, for what to include in your bolt kit.

Pete Takeda solo on Pitch 14 of Zodiac. Photo by Greg Epperson.

Climber Impacts

By Mark Fincher, Climbing Ranger, Yosemite National Park

Big wall climbing is one of the more spectacular uses of Yosemite National Park. Climbers love the challenge and visitors love the spectacle. But if the sport is to continue to flourish, climbers must minimize their impacts through sensitive use.

The big walls of Yosemite Valley have a different legal status from the valley floor and trails. In 1984, Congress designated the big walls as wilderness, so the Park Service has a duty to protect the walls in their natural state. But the NPS also has an obligation to minimize the regulation of climbing and to maximize climbers' freedom in pursuing their sport. Climbers have an equal obligation to take care of the park: to respect the rocks of the valley, the plants and animals that call them home, and their fellow climbers.

Most big wall climbers respect the valley. But a small group does not, and they can mess things up for everyone. At the base of El Cap—litter, illegal campsites, fire rings, soot scars and excrement bags tossed from above. On the walls—rotting fixed ropes and cracks stuffed full of trash and excrement. On the summits—abandoned belay seats, poop tubes, food, water bottles, huge windbreaks built around dozens of littered campsites, and not a stick of firewood to be found. This situation must not continue.

All climbers camping at the top of walls or at the base of Half Dome must follow park rules for wilderness camping:

Permits and Bivies

Currently, wilderness permits are not required for nights spent on a wall or for emergency bivouacs on the summit. But if you plan to spend the night on top of the wall, you need a permit. Camping is not allowed at the base of any walls in the valley except Half Dome, where you are required to have a permit. Wilderness permits can be obtained at the Wilderness Center in Yosemite. Camping is prohibited on the summit of Half Dome.

Trash and Litter

Carry out everything you brought and pick up any trash you find. Don't stash food or water "for the next party" for "future ascents" or for any other reason. Stashed food and water is trash. In recent years bears have started visiting the rim of El Cap and the base of Half Dome because so much food was left there. Never throw trash off a wall saying you will pick it up later.

Wildlife Restrictions

Check the notice board in Camp 4 for any closures such as seasonal closures to protect nesting raptors such as the peregrine falcon.

Hammerless Aid

Use your hammer as little as possible. There are many reasons to climb hammerless: you generally move faster, you have less impact on the rock, and there is more creativity and adventure involved. Today, even notorious nail-ups like the Sea of Dreams can and should go 80% hammerless. Not having the right gear is no excuse. Come prepared to climb hammerless by carrying a selection of cam hooks, aliens and offset nuts and anything else that will suppress your need to nail.

Constructive Pin Scarring

Favor upward blows when cleaning pitons. This will make the placement more likely to take a nut or other hammerless placement in the future.

Bivy Sites

Follow the "Leave no trace" ethic. Do not build new windbreaks, sleeping platforms or other "improvements" to bivouac sites. There should be enough existing spots to deal with people's needs. If you really have to move rocks, replace them afterward.

Campfires

Do not make campfires except in an emergency. Burning wood at a place like the top of El Cap inhibits future plant growth. In an emergency

situation, if you must build a fire, use an existing fire ring and be sure to put the fire completely out (two wildfires have been started by climbers' bivy fires in recent years). There are simply too many climbers to have campfires in this sensitive area.

Human Waste

It is no longer acceptable to "bag and toss." Tossing excrement to the ground or stuffing it in cracks pollutes water, which makes people and animals sick, and is a safety hazard (several climbers have been hit by flying bags). Build a poop tube out of PVC or other rigid material and carry it with you on the wall. Defecate into a paper bag (plastic bags clog the pumps that empty the toilet vaults), add a little kitty litter to reduce odors, and empty your tube into any vault toilet.

Fixed Ropes

If you are not actively using your ropes, they should be removed. Ropes left in place as permanent fixtures may be removed by the Park Service. They may also be in really bad condition. Don't count on finding fixed rope.

Fixed Anchors

The use or possession of motorized drills is not allowed in the undeveloped areas of the park. Hand drilling is allowed. Think before you drill. Is that new bolt necessary or just convenient?

How Climbers Can Help

1 When you see climbers tossing bags, dumping trash or running down descent trails, let them know what you think of their actions. Their impact may seem minor, but when multiplied by the hundreds of parties on the walls each year, it makes a huge difference.

2 Get involved. Support the efforts of the National Park Service and climbing organizations. If you have comments on climbing arrangements or ideas on how things could be better managed, get in touch with the Park Service nps.gov/yose/ or an organization such as The Access Fund accessfund.org, American Alpine Club americanalpineclub.org or the American Safe Climbing Association safeclimbing.org.

Horrific climber-generated refuse on Thanksgiving Ledge 1998. Photo by Chris McNamara.

Aid Climbing Ratings

Grade Ratings

Grade ratings give a sense of the overall commitment required on a climb. Grades I and II refer to short crag routes. These ratings are seldom used.

Grade III refers to half-day routes. *Examples:* Royal Arches, Nutcracker.

Grade IV refers to full-day routes. *Example:* East Buttress of El Cap.

Grade V refers to shorter big wall routes. Fast parties may only take a day, but most parties will spend two to three days on the wall. *Examples:* West Face of Leaning Tower, Prow, South Face of Washington Column.

Grade VI refers to longer big wall routes. All but the fastest teams require at least two days and usually many more. *Examples:* Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome, all routes on El Capitan.

Grade VII refers to extreme alpine big walls that require at least 10 days of suffering on a huge wall in poor weather in a remote area. *Examples:* Great and Secret Show, Baffin Island; Grand Voyage, Great Trango Tower, Pakistan.

Aid Ratings

In the early '90s the "new wave" rating system was introduced to wall climbs in Yosemite Valley. Although it was originally touted as being more precise than the previous A1-A5 system, it is now clear that the new wave system only brought more confusion to the ratings process. This book ignores the new wave system and reverts to the system introduced 30 years ago, with a few modifications. That said, this new system will have problems, and it is in no way the final word in aid ratings.

Keep in mind that aid ratings are only one measure of the difficulty of a wall climb. Weather, the length of the climb, skill, physical condition of the climber, the number of previous ascents, approach and descent, and many other factors all combine to determine the overall difficulty of a wall. Pitch ratings also can't include the dangers of bad bolts and poor fixed gear. Bolt ladders on Tangerine Trip, which should theoretically be "A1", have scored many 30- to 50-foot falls when rivets broke. Big airtime has also been logged on the Groove pitch of the Shield when numerous fixed pieces pulled. Don't trust fixed gear and be prepared if it should pull.

Aid ratings are based on the number of bodyweight placements in a row. How is a "bodyweight" placement differentiated from a "bomber" placement? The only way to know for certain is to take a fall. The next best way to find out is to ask yourself, "Would I belay off this?" If the answer is "no" then it is probably a bodyweight placement.

A0 Pulling on pieces for progress while in free climbing mode. Generally no aiders are used.

A1 or C1 Easy aid: all placements are bomber. Little danger of falling except through pilot error. Most A1 pitches take from one to two hours. *Examples:* many pitches on Half Dome's Regular Route, the Nose, and South Face of the Column.

A2 or C2 Moderate aid: one or two bodyweight placements over bomber gear. Five- to 30-foot fall potential. *Examples:* many pitches on Zodiac, Prow, and Direct on Half Dome. Most A2 pitches take one to three hours.

A3 or C3 Hard aid: three to five bodyweight placements in a row. Thirty- to 50-foot fall potential. *Examples:* many pitches on Pacific Ocean Wall, Mescalito and Ten Days After. Most A3 pitches take two to three hours.

A4 or C4 Serious aid: Six to eight bodyweight placements in a row and a 50- to 80-foot fall potential. *Examples:* many pitches on Sea of Dreams, Atlantic Ocean Wall and Native Son. Most A4 pitches take more than three hours.

A5 or C5 Extreme aid: more than nine bodyweight placements in a row. Eighty-foot plus fall potential. Most A5 pitches take more than four hours. *Examples:* most El Cap routes, such as Reticent Wall and Nightmare on California Street, put up in the '90s.

"C" This pitch goes hammerless without relying on fixed gear. It is highly unlikely that you will need a hammer on these pitches. *Examples:* all pitches on the Nose, Regular Route on Half Dome, and the South Face of Washington Column.

"A" This pitch generally requires a hammer to place pitons or copperheads. *Examples:* all pitches on the Reticent Wall and many pitches on Native Son, Lost in America, Zenith and Sea of Dreams.

"F" comes after a "C" rating and denotes a pitch that relies on fixed gear in order to go hammerless. Ninety-five percent of the time, pitches marked with "F" will go hammerless, but to be safe, put a hammer and a couple of copperheads and pins in the bottom of the haulbag in case fixed gear is missing. *Examples:* many pitches on the Leaning Tower, Prow and Zodiac.

"R" Dangerous fall potential because of the possibility of hitting a ledge, swinging into a corner or running the rope over a sharp edge. *Examples:* Black Tower pitch on Zodiac (A2R or C3R) where a fall is possible onto a ramp, Pitch 13 on the Reticent Wall (A5R) where the leader must do numerous hook and head moves above a ledge.

Note: Just because a pitch does not have an "R" or an "X" rating does not mean you can't become injured or die on that pitch.

"+" indicates a tricky or strenuous section. Found on either strenuous terrain (roof or deep corner) or an unusually tricky "boulder problem" aid move (expanding flake, huge reach). Pitches marked with a "+" are thought provoking and often more time consuming. *Examples:* the Nipple Pitch on Zodiac (C3+(F)), Shield Roof (A2+), and Pitch 5 of the South Face of Washington Column (C1+).

Many people wonder why aid ratings change over time (e.g. a route that was A5 in 1970 might be A3 today). The reason is that all routes go through a life cycle in which pin placements become more solid and the strongest copperhead placements are found and left fixed. Also, bolts are added both as "chicken-bolts" and because rock features fall off. To give a general understanding of this process I have provided the metamorphosis of a typical Yosemite A5 route:

Ascents	Rating	Route condition
1–5	A5	Little fixed gear. Fragile features.
6–20	A4	Half the heads are fixed. Some features pull so bolts are added. Pin placements are more solid. A few chicken rivets added. Belay bolts added.
21–40	A3/A4	Most heads are fixed. Most fragile features and loose rock are gone. More belay bolts and chicken bolts added.
41+	A3	Route reaches "equilibrium" as all heads in crux and sections are fixed and pin placements beat out to take hammerless gear.

Because some routes within the same grade are harder or easier than other routes in that grade, I have listed all the routes in order of overall difficulty in the appendix.

Facing page: George Whitmore prusiking the final pitch on the first ascent of the Nose, El Capitan 1958. Photo by Wayne Merry.


Chef
24-15½OZ.CANS