

Minimal Impact

STEPHEN PORCELLA

AFTER AN EXHAUSTING FULL-DAY APPROACH HIKE, 1500 feet of talus and class-3 wet-rock scrambling, we threw down our gear and made camp amongst a pile of boulders at the base of a large rock wall. Many people had attempted to climb this rock, but no one had been successful. An old bleached rope attached to a bolt one third of the way up the wall was an unsightly reminder of a previous failed attempt. My wife, Sandy, volunteered to carry a load in for us with the stipulation that she could run home to a cozy bed afterwards. She looked down at our boulder-strewn orthopedist's nightmare, chuckled, said "Sleep well," and started her race with the sun out of the canyon. Little did we realize that our initial attempt on this rock would be foiled before we even touched it with our hands. My partner, Bruce Anderson, a long-time resident and superb climber, had been sabotaged by a small, yet infamous fiend of these mountains: a tick. One week earlier, while in this canyon, a tick had slipped by Bruce's detection systems to bury its head in the flesh on the back of his neck. He found the bugger just four days ago and although he didn't know it, it was too late by then.

Bruce mentioned a splitting headache, an upset stomach and something about a fast heart rate that wouldn't slow down. A half hour later, he said he felt dizzy. I quickly stashed some of the gear and we began the hike out. As we walked, I thought about the disease Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF) and some of its early symptoms: a racing heart rate, a splitting headache, nausea and fever being just a few. The strain of RMSF found here in the Bitterroot Range of Montana is well known in the medical field. Before antibiotics were available, people who were bitten by an infected tick and then contracted the disease had a 70% chance of dying a very horrible death. My thoughts were suddenly interrupted when Bruce exclaimed, "Whoa, mountain goats!" and pointed to two large white rocks a short distance away on the talus.

"Those are rocks," I said as I scrutinized his sincerity.

Bruce looked at me with a pallor I will never forget and said, "Jeez, I'm hallucinating." Bruce's hallucinogenic apogee occurred when the flight of a spooked grouse was mistaken for large bears charging at us from the trees nearby. In the darkness of the forest, we trudged on.

Two weeks and a ton of antibiotics later, Bruce was as fit as a fiddle and ready to make up for a lost opportunity. With the false promise of a luxurious pine-needle bed, Sandy volunteered once again to carry a load and spend the

PLATE 9

Photo by Sandra Porcella

**“Seven Steps to Heaven” on the
CWALQN, Bitterroot Mountains,
Montana.**



weekend with us. On the approach hike to the rock, during frequent checks, we pulled more than 40 ticks off our hair, skin and clothes.

At the base of the rock, I racked up and started the first pitch, excited about the free-climbing opportunities ahead. After 15 feet, I was begging Bruce to send up my *étriers*. One hundred and fifty feet out on the first pitch, a drenching rainstorm suddenly poured over the top of the rock. In seconds, Bruce was under an alcove and I was completely soaked and hypothermic in my capilene shirt and pants. Shivering uncontrollably, I could not move. Thirty minutes later, I felt enough warmth in my bones to finish the last 15 feet of the pitch. Bruce raced past me and fixed another 60 feet, employing some dicey traversing of a horizontal off-width using a single #4 Camelot. We fixed two ropes and bailed. That night, intermittent cold rain forced all three of us to scrunch into a small two-man tent for a restless, fitful sleep.

We began *jümaring* the fixed ropes at six A.M. the next morning. At our high point, Bruce finished the pitch he had started the day before, which was probably the most spectacular and thrilling of the route. A perfect 1/2 inch crack split a horizontal roof that jutted out at least ten feet. Elation with the rock and the climbing, however, was soon replaced by fear when I approached the belay and discovered that the only available pin placements were at the base of a wobbly small pillar. The weight of the pillar was all that held the shallow angles in place. A lie-back up the pillar in order to move off of the belay would have spelled curtains for us. Although it would have been safer, a bolt backing up the belay would have taken too long to drill by hand and it would have scarred the rock forever. Employing a delicate mantle on the pillar, I was able to reach high enough to place micro nuts and aid beyond the wobbly pillar to begin the third pitch. As I left the belay, a collective sigh of relief from both of us was noticeably loud.

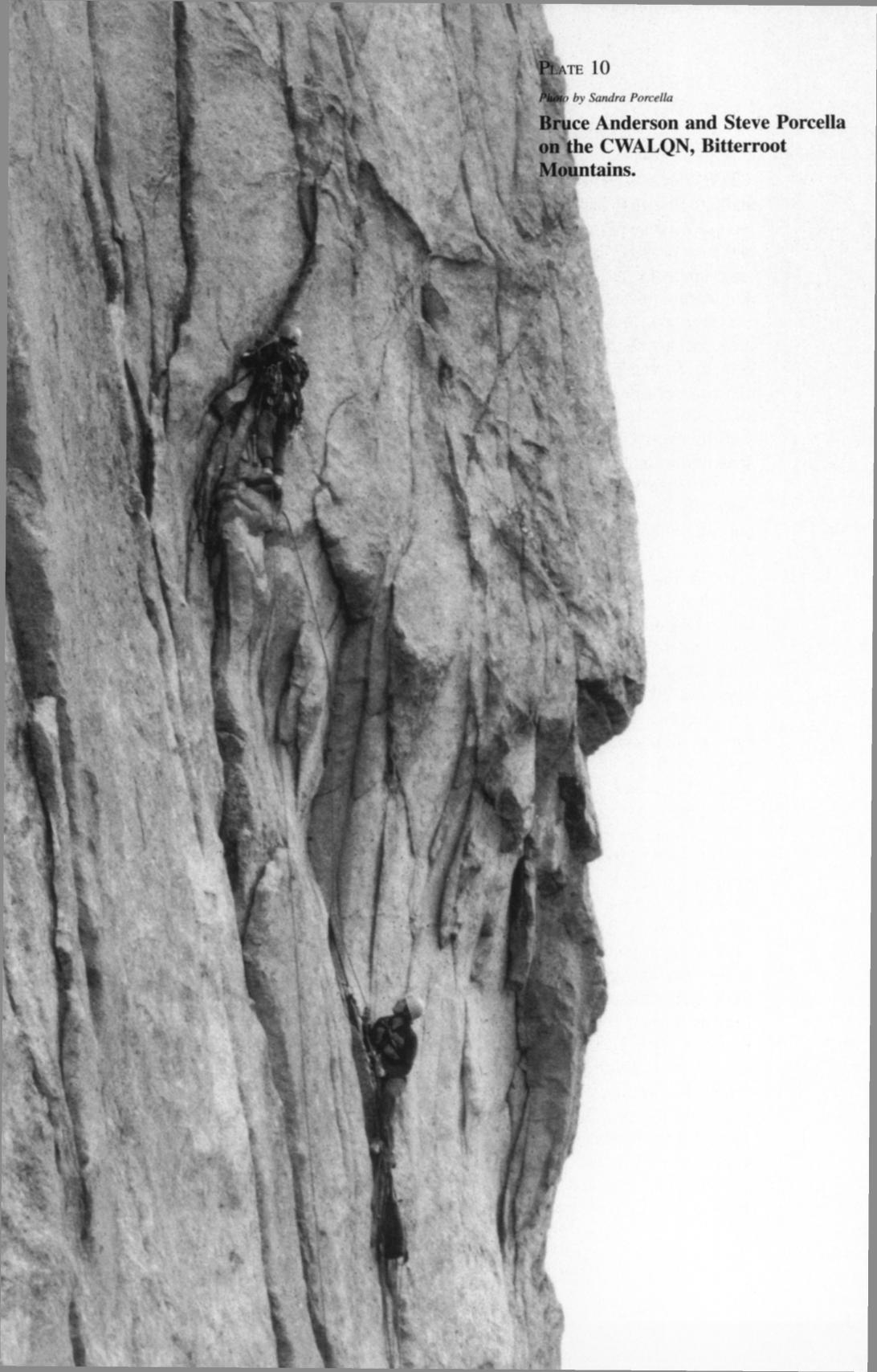
At the top of the third pitch the rock returned us to the undeniable reality of the range: dark lines that look like cracks are not cracks. The upper cracks on the wall that we had observed from the ground were now, upon close inspection, actually classic Bitterroot flaring water grooves. Looking like the cross section of a trumpet horn, these cracks proved obstinate against holding anything solid. For us, the abbreviation TCU now stood for Two Camming Units, since this was all that would stick. The route continued to angle up and left following the natural line of water grooves.

On the fifth pitch, 35 feet out, I wavered. I came to a section that required a traversing hook move on a small, flexible nubbin to reach a thin knife-blade crack to the left. A fall didn't worry me so much as the possibility of pulling off the only natural feature that would get us through this section. As I hooked the nubbin, testing it slightly, every burger, shake and fries that I had ever eaten and that had contributed to my 6'2" 170-pound frame flooded my tiny brain. I looked at the nubbin and suddenly felt like a fat pig 650 feet up the wall of the slaughterhouse with my meat hook about to rip. Speed on this route was of the essence, so I resigned. I lowered off and let Bruce and his 135-pound frame have a go at it. Bruce negotiated the hook section in typically good style and

PLATE 10

Photo by Sandra Porcella

**Bruce Anderson and Steve Porcella
on the CWALQN, Bitterroot
Mountains.**



100 feet out on the pitch disappeared into a white-out of blowing snow. The snow, although cold, was dry and therefore would not soak us into hypothermic sluggishness. At the top of the fifth pitch, Bruce was filled with enthusiasm and purpose. He was tuned and he knew he had done a phenomenal job on the last lead up the angling water grooves. I've always believed in giving it to whoever has it. At that moment, Bruce had it, and so I gave him the sixth lead.

I watched him take off from the belay as TCUs rotated and popped out of the grooves, sliding down the rope behind him. He moved with confidence, each movement becoming more committing and the potential pendulum fall more serious. A hundred feet out and off to the left, I saw Bruce launch into space. His body arched backwards, slowly rotating in the air until his back was parallel to and facing the ground. His right hand was a few feet from the speeding wall. As the rope went taut, his body bent over backwards appearing almost to break in half at his waist. His helmeted head scraped the adjacent wall as he came to a stop. With a moment of hesitation, he pulled himself upright and gazed thirty feet up at the point where he had come off. Bruce's luck had run out. Two cams of a TCU had finally refused to bite and a Camelot below had been just good enough to stop the fall.

When I reached the belay above where Bruce had fallen, my relief that he was all right was quickly replaced by fear of the belay. Again, as with the third belay, all the pin placements were marginal. Moving carefully past the fearful belay, I started the seventh pitch where the first actual free climbing of the route appeared. Face moves at 5.10 protected by shallow angles allowed us to gain the eave that led to the summit. Our summit time was six P.M. We had spent twelve solid hours of fast hurried climbing up the rock. After a two-hour rappel descent, we stood at the base of the monolith, which was now bathed in twilight. Sandy rejoiced with Bruce and me in our first ascent of this spectacular rock. Our most satisfying and meaningful impression, however, came from the intimate knowledge of the style in which it was performed. No bolts were placed, aluminum heads were placed delicately and removed by hand (minimum deformation of the rock) and only three pins were left: two for a crucial pendulum and one for a free move on the seventh pitch. We named the route Seven Steps to Heaven and rated it Grade V, 5.10, A3.

I recently contacted the Salish tribal council elders because Bruce and I and some of the other local climbers wanted to give this unnamed rock and others in the range Indian names. The reasons for Indian names are many. The Salish Indians were here before the white man and were subsequently forcibly removed. Another important reason is that the Salish believe that all generations are interconnected. They believe that each generation is responsible for preserving and maintaining the environment in its natural state for future generations. I and other climbers in Montana hold these beliefs to be true with respect to our style of climbing. We prefer a climbing style that centers upon the minimal impact with the least possible alteration of the surface of the rock on new and established climbs. When we give Indian names to these rocks, we feel we are paying respect to those people who left the environment as it was

for us and that by our climbing style we are attempting to preserve it that way for others. We and the Salish tribal council elders have given the name Cwalqn (pronounced Qwal-kin) to the rock that Seven Steps to Heaven lies upon. Cwalqn is the Salish word for Leaning Head. Whether this name sticks to this rock or not is up to the climbers and hikers who continue to enjoy and work to preserve all forms of wilderness that exist on and off the rock in Montana.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Bitterroot Range, Montana.

FIRST ASCENT: The Cwalqn, "Seven Steps to Heaven," V, 5.10, A3. May 23, 1993
(Bruce Anderson, Stephen Porcella).



PLATE 11

Photo by Sandra Porcella

**Bruce Anderson leading on 4th Pitch
of the CWALQN.**