

The Gunks Guide: Rock Climbs in the Shawangunks of New York. Todd Swain. Alpine Diversions, New Paltz, 1986. 318 pages, black and white photographs, sketch maps. \$20.00 (paper).

The Shawangunks is the finest rock climbing area in the Eastern United States and is internationally known for its spectacular overhangs and wide range of excellent climbs in every grade. It is one of the few places where beginners and experts alike can climb side by side on routes of equal quality but opposite extremes of difficulty. Recently there has been a surge of new route activity in the highest grades that has even given the Gunks undeniable world-class status.

Equalling the difficulty of these new routes has been the perennial problem of creating a guidebook that measures up to the excellence of the area. Unfortunately, the Gunks does not lend itself very well to guidebook treatment because of the almost monotonous uniformity of the rock, the size of the cliffs, and the wandering nature of many of the lines. To be successful, then, a guidebook must provide sufficient detail to sort out the confusion and, at the same time, be accurate and easy to use.

Various formats have been tried. Topos have been well-known failures because the Gunks has too many critical details in too small an area for symbols to be useful. Route descriptions by themselves have also proven to be inadequate because they are too prone to misinterpretation if the author has been less than meticulous with the English language. To use an old cliché, a picture is worth a thousand words, and Art Gran capitalized on this by using high-resolution photographs of the cliffs in conjunction with route descriptions in his 1964 guidebook. Dick Williams then successfully continued the trend in his 1972 guidebook. However, when Williams revised his guide in 1980, two major design flaws became immediately apparent. The book was too fat and couldn't be carried in your pocket on those esoteric multipitch routes, and there was no convenient cross-referencing system between the route descriptions and the photographs at the end of each section; instead, one had to laboriously flip back and forth to the index or search tediously through the text. Nevertheless, the strong point of the 1980 guidebook was its abundant and well-reproduced photographs, most large enough to reveal even the smallest detail.

Todd Swain, with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, has thus had the opportunity to create a first-class guidebook by avoiding the mistakes of the past. So how does *The Gunks Guide* measure up to the old guides and the area?

On the positive side, *The Gunks Guide* miraculously fits in your pocket, despite containing nearly 1000 routes or roughly double that of the 1980 guidebook, so there is no need to rip it in half. Todd has also obviated the need to cross-reference the photos and route descriptions by interspersing the photos in the text near the descriptions rather than bunching them up at the end of each section. Both advantages will save everyone a lot of trouble.

Most climbers will also appreciate Todd's use of the 0-3 star quality rating system and letter grades G, PG, R, and X for protection. Todd may have been

a bit conservative with his quality ratings, but he should be given credit for making a good-faith effort to steer visiting climbers away from horrid routes like "Ventre de Boeuf" and "Red's Ruin." On the other hand, Todd may not have been conservative enough with his protection ratings. Climbs such as "Blind Ambition," "Thunder and Frightening," "To Be or Not to Be," and "The Black-out," to name a few, are all probably more serious than indicated. Guidebook authors owe a special responsibility to climbers to be accurate in this respect, even more so than with difficulty ratings which are much more subject to individual variation.

Two other welcome additions have been Todd's use of and symbols instead of the awkward phrases "hard for the grade" and "easy for the grade" or the illogical a-b-c-d subdivisions, and his reintroduction of silly puns and slapstick humor to liven up the text. There is even a "trivial pursuit" page to amuse climbing historians on rainy days.

On the negative side, the biggest failing of *The Gunks Guide* is its lack of attention to detail. The book seems to have been rushed into production without much consideration for quality. Nowhere is this more apparent than with the photographs which are almost invariably too small, too dark, and poorly reproduced. Newcomers to the area will find them difficult to use for locating routes. And compounding the problem are a number of vague route descriptions, especially when second and third pitches are concerned.

The internal design of the book leaves much to be desired as well. Route and first-ascent information is jammed together in an unorganized fashion, and so much is crowded on each page that details are sometimes cut off at the margins. Running heads are often omitted at the tops of the pages, making it difficult to know where you are when casually flipping through the book. Even more distracting is the large number of misspellings (seven on the first five pages alone), the improper use of punctuation, and the conspicuous lack of hyphenation. One should expect better from a \$20 guidebook.

Todd has also dropped the ball on the difficult subject of ethics. His brief discussion at the beginning does not convey the crisis that exists at the Gunks concerning such unethical practices as chopping holds and using aid to preplace protection on so-called "free" routes. While he does make a strong plea for preservation of the area (which is on private land), this should extend to the traditional standards of climbing as well, since such standards act to preserve the environment from unbridled Munich mechanization and the unnecessary proliferation of bolts.

The overall advantage of *The Gunks Guide* is that it concentrates most of the known routes on the four most popular cliffs in the Gunks in a single volume. A host of new routes has been opened up for climbers to enjoy. For this reason alone, *The Gunks Guide* is recommended, but don't throw away the earlier guidebooks, for their pictures are worth a thousand words.

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