

The Free Nose of North Chasm View Wall

Puzzling it out among the birds in Colorado's Black Canyon of the Gunnison

by JEFF ACHEY

Rocks can possess a strange charisma. Any tourist can vaguely sense this power, but to a climber, with his or her specific abilities, it can be dangerous: it can produce a growing desire to climb. If the ascent has repulsed others, or seems unlikely, or proves to require extreme sacrifice and effort, an obsession can take hold. Interest in the real world wanes. Rock daydreams erode day-to-day productivity. Social life deteriorates, and the climber catches himself staring at pictures of a shining buttress late into the night.

There are internal psychological symptoms. For example, once the project is begun, the climber's perception of effort changes. Pushing to the limit no longer comes from ambition, but obligation. The repeated attempts feel necessary, and therefore effortless. Hazard analysis suffers from this same illusion of necessity, and the usual justification process is short-circuited. In 1995, I became obsessed, with the Nose of North Chasm View, in Colorado's Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

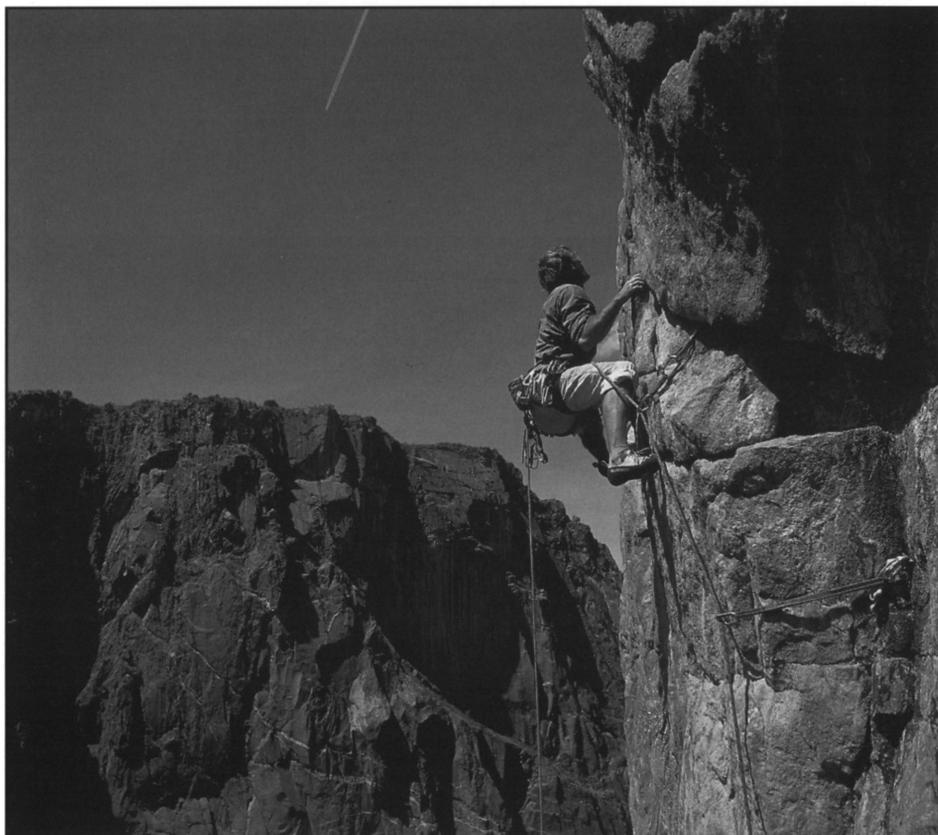
This 1,600-foot south-facing buttress is a half-size replica of Yosemite's Nose, hidden in a dark and narrow gorge, far from tour busses and posh lodges. Still, it sits across from a popular scenic overlook on the tourist drive through the Black Canyon, and was one of Colorado's two most coveted big-wall objectives in the early '70s, second only to the tallest unbroken cliff in the state, the then-unclimbed Painted Wall a mile down canyon. In 1973, one year after Bill Forrest and Kris Walker's epic first ascent of the Painted Wall, Wayne Goss and Jim Logan, of Boulder, climbed the first part of the Nose.

Goss and Logan's route began right of the toe of the buttress, following cracks and chimneys to a big terraced ledge system covered with the canyon's typical prickly bushes and loose rock. Several routes easily access this terrace, and for climbers, the "business" begins above.

Off the left end of the terrace, Goss and Logan climbed two more pitches to the top of a pillar, then headed up into a striking orange dihedral, one of the conspicuous features of the Chasm View Wall. The aid got increasingly thin, and at a blank-out point, half height on the canyon wall where the Nose is steepest, the pair had a choice: try to hook out left into steep, rotten, dubious ground (a place from which, two decades later, on rappel, Chip Chace and I would dislodge huge guillotine-like plates of rock), or escape right, where a grassy bivouac ledge beckoned. They pendulumed right, leaving the Nose buttress, and the next morning followed the natural line above, soon joining Layton Kor and Larry Dalke's 1964 route on the less daunting southeast face of Chasm View. They reached the rim on their third day.

In 1977, Earl Wiggins and Bryan Becker, of Colorado Springs, climbed a direct route up the Nose. At VI 5.10 A5, it was, at the time, the hardest wall ascent in the state. Dubbed simply *The Nose*, this route traversed left off the brushy terrace, across a blank section, reaching thin cracks on the prow of the buttress. Following a line a few hundred feet left of the Goss-Logan dihedral, Wiggins and Becker climbed discontinuous cracks and hanging corners, through bands of decomposed rock, to a crack system leading through large roofs directly to the Nose guard rail—one of the most spectacular lines in the canyon.

The Black Canyon—always known for scary, committing climbing, crumbling pegmatite, and the head-high forests of poison ivy in its boulder-choked gullies—grew notorious as one of the

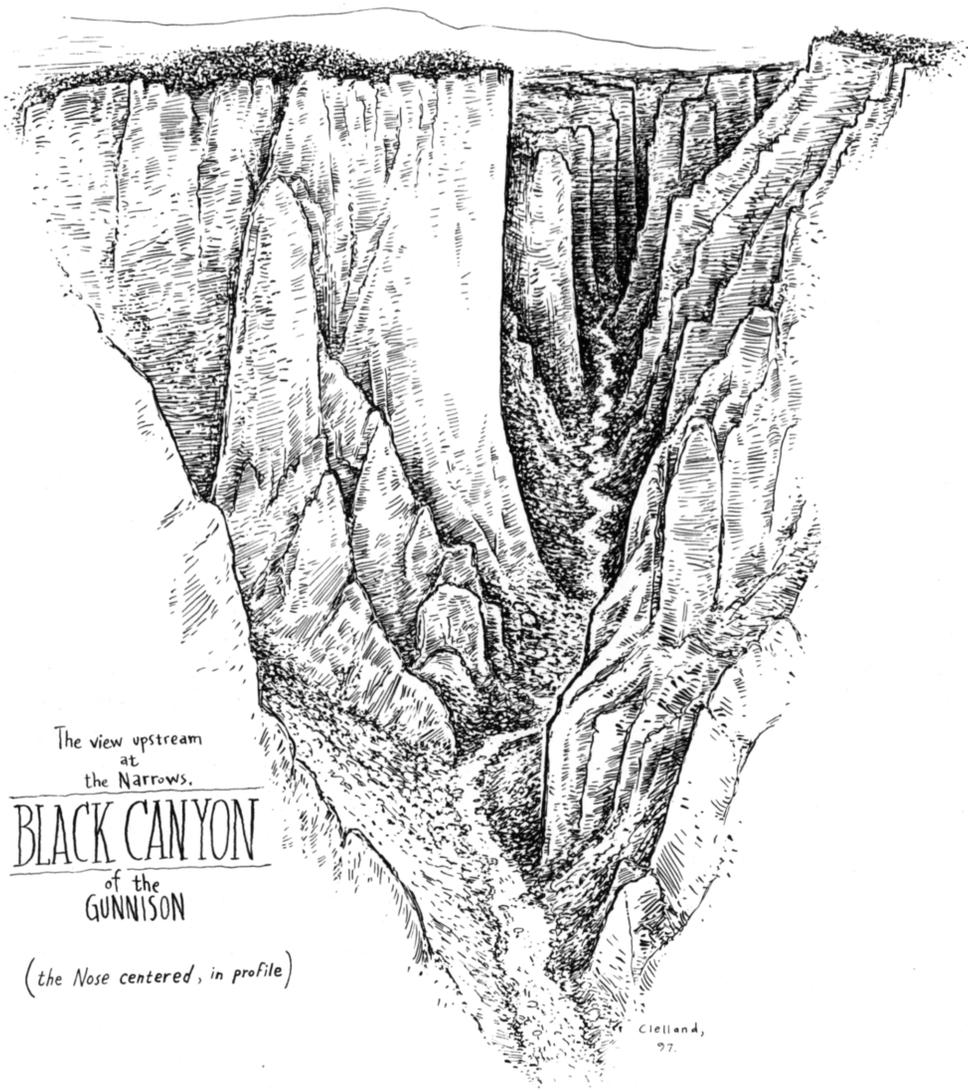


Achey on Pitch 10 (5.12), the Free Nose. Jimmy Surette

country's proving grounds for the late '70s craze of long, hard free-climbing routes. In 1976, Wiggins and Jim Dunn broke the ice with one of the most audacious free-climbing days of all time, an on-sight free ascent of Kor and Dalke's 1964 North Chasm View route. They blasted up the committing, little-traveled Grade V in six hours, renaming it *The Cruise*.

Wiggins and Dunn's success set the pace for an ambitious era (and also got them in big trouble when they tried out their bold new style on some ill-chosen routes). The next few years saw one-day free ascents of many of Kor's 1960s Grade IVs and Vs: the *Hooker*, *Diagonal Will* (Ed Webster and Bryan Becker freed these two in a single weekend), and Painted Wall arêtes, and the *South Chasm View Flakes*—as well as a few new lines. These routes generally had technical cruxes of 5.10, and always featured rotten pegmatite pitches, runout face-climbing, confusing route-finding high on the wall—or sometimes all three. For a small faction of Colorado climbers, myself included, the Black Canyon became the *raison d'être* for free-climbing skills developed on the shorter crags. We talked more than we actually climbed in "The Black," but our schemes were of being down among the birds, awash in the roar of the Gunnison River, climbing ever harder free walls.

The first free climb near the Nose was in 1979, when Leonard Coyne and Ed Russell managed an all-free variation to the Goss-Logan (V 5.11a) by face climbing from low in the orange dihedral directly to the end of the original pendulum. Rumors circulated about other efforts: Jim Dunn



The view upstream
at
the Narrows.

BLACK CANYON

of the
GUNNISON

(the Nose centered, in profile)

is said to have free climbed part of the dihedral (how much is uncertain) in one of his trademark (that is, desperate and extremely high-standard) flurries. Someone apparently free climbed the last pitch of the Wiggins-Becker route, at 5.10, in the mid-1980s, by rappelling down on a “rest day.” But that was it. The blank, overhanging, and occasionally crumbling rock of the main Nose deterred all other free-climbing progress until our attempts in 1995-96.

In the meantime, extreme free routes went up on other Black Canyon walls. Some of the most impressive were *Air Voyage* (V 5.12a, 1980) and the *Stoned Oven* (V 5.11c/d), both on the Chasm View Wall to the left of the Nose; the little-known *Cheap Shot* (V 5.11c) on the Hooker Buttress, a half mile downstream; *Stratosfear* (V/VI 5.11b, 1982) on the Painted Wall; and *Astrodog* (V 5.11d) on the shadowed and hard-to-reach South Chasm View Wall. *Stratosfear*—mostly moderate until a horrific pegmatite pitch and the 200-foot crux traverse just below the huge roofs that block access to the rim—remains, at 2,200-feet plus, by far the longest hard free climb in the state. *Air Voyage*, with an appalling 5.12 offwidth pitch coming after 1,500 feet of

climbing, is technically much harder, and still sees very few all-free ascents. *Cheap Shot*, the story goes, was usurped (hence the name) by Earl Wiggins and Katy Cassidy from Wiggins' brother Art. Above the well-spaced bolts leading to the original team's high point, a few hundred feet up the wall, Wiggins and Cassidy climbed all clean up a steep, concave face, with long pitches, marginal belays, and frequent dangerous runouts on hard climbing—one of the most serious routes in the canyon.

The *Free Nose* proved to be far more complex and difficult than these routes, and one of the reasons it was not free climbed until 1996 was that most Black Canyon climbers—for reasons ranging from stylistic conviction to impatience—shunned the kind of extensive siege we launched. Basically, it was obsession, rather than any great skill, that led to our success.

A few comments on style seem in order here, since free climbing has wandered far from its original footloose form. Pure big-wall climbing, with its arsenal of tools, absolutely needs the uncertainty of ground-up tactics, but the big-wall free-climbing game is more contrived. Unless far from cracks and protection, the free climber seldom reaches the rarefied state of mind of the strung-out wall climber or the high-altitude mountaineer. He carries with him, in his head, an easy escape from the demands of his objective. "Rescue" is as easy as grabbing a carabiner.

Free climbing, therefore, as natural and beautiful as its movements are, is a stylistically degenerate form of mountaineering. Increasingly (recent climbs on Nameless Tower and El Capitan are examples), the modern free climber flaunts a bunch of lofty-sounding ideals, then keeps them only by extensive aid inspections and rehearsal. These tactics appear ridiculous to the traditional mountaineer.

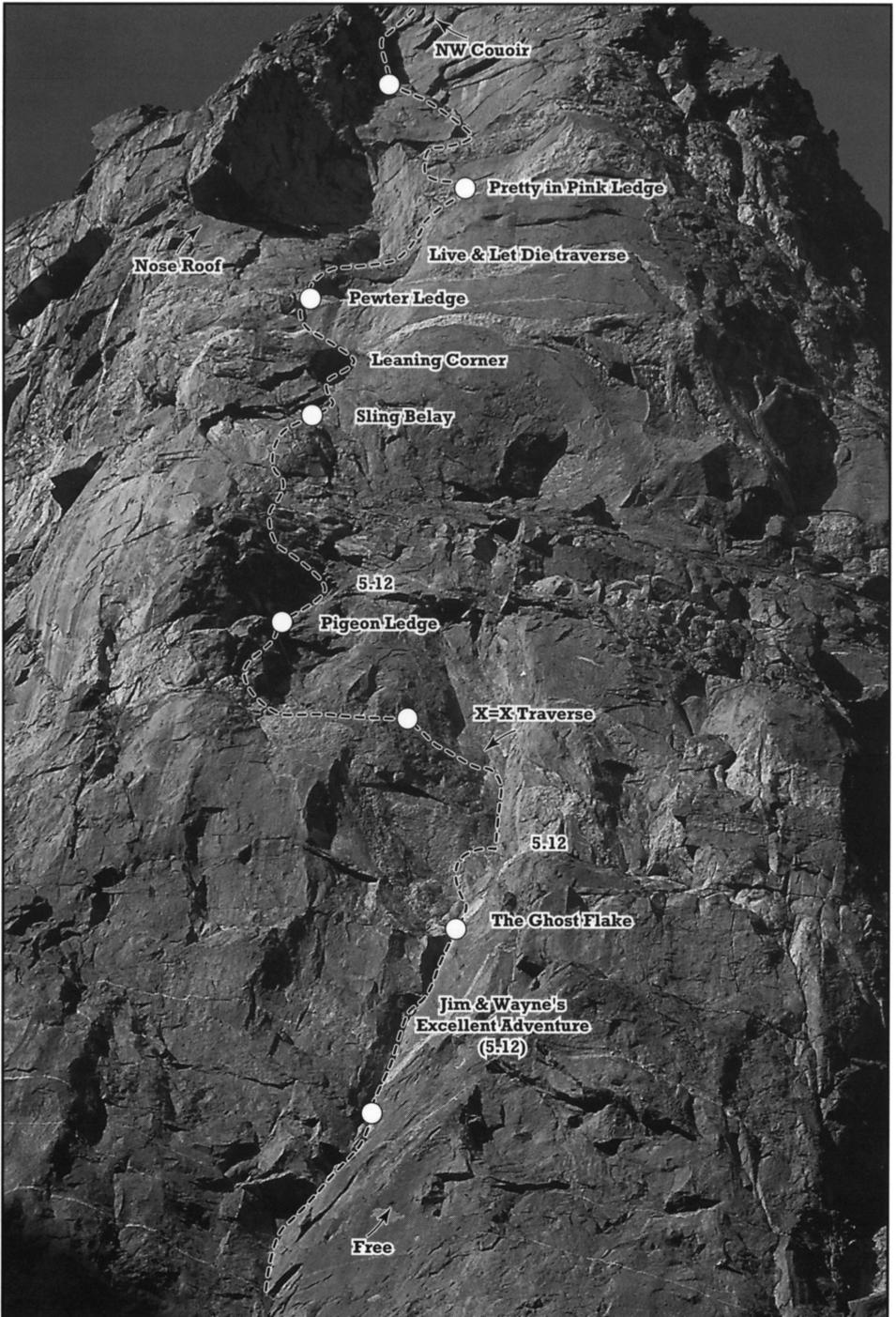
With that said, free climbing can be appreciated for what it is: no better or worse than any other style of climbing. It is gymnastic, complex, and satisfying. Furthermore, in our case, the Black Canyon is not a mountain. There is no summit, only a surfacing from a hole in the ground.

Retreat from any Black Canyon route is epic: dozens of rappels, with few fixed anchors, take you back down to the remote canyon bottom, from where you must then escape up gullies ranging from unpleasant to death-defying. More than one Black Canyon free climber has roped down from the rim to check out what he was getting into, but extensive previewing proves easier imagined than done. There are horror stories about the rope-down shenanigans used on crux sections of early extreme free climbs, notably *Air Voyage* and *Stratosfear*, and these epics occurred within two rope lengths of the rim.

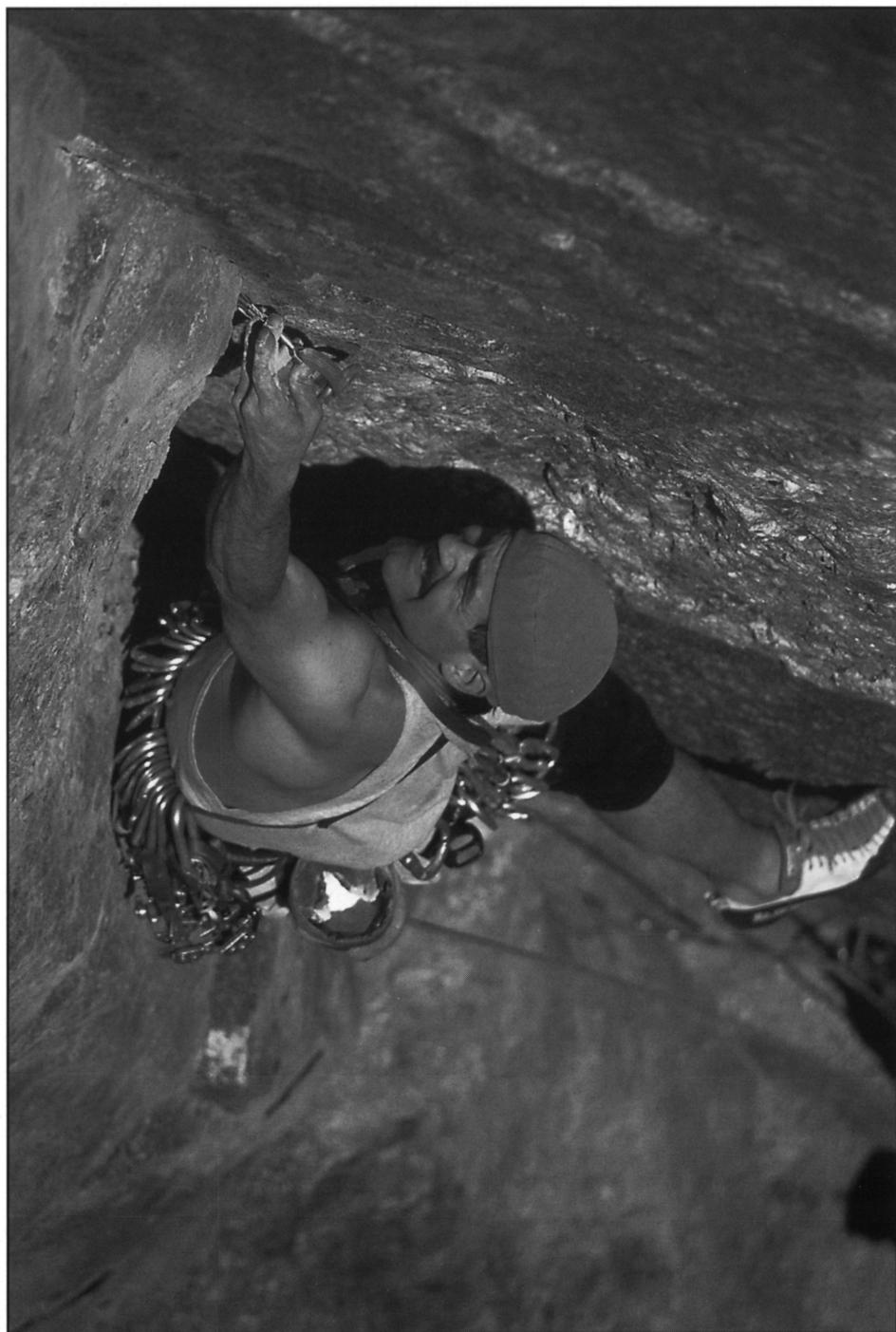
The *Nose*, however, had numerous cruxes and blank sections scattered all over the route, and finding a line of weakness required a quantum leap in rappel recon. Before ever climbing a pitch, I made more than a half-dozen explorations, with four different partners, roping down over 1000 feet. I'd rappel down a corner only to find it dead-end in a blank overhang. Access to a promising crack would be blocked by a band of "brown sugar" rock. The terrain was so steep that it was difficult to stay near the wall, much less make the sideways progress that always seemed necessary. The Black Canyon's metamorphic rock is not Yosemite granite, and the ropes constantly dislodged loose flakes, suffering numerous nicks and cuts.

These epic rappels, each of which seemed to involve at least one hideous close call, were by far the most dangerous part of the *Free Nose* ascent. The upper part was the easiest, though in the end we would deviate from the aid *Nose* line to avoid climbing through a certain "hanging blocks" roof (one free-climbing trip through that was more than enough).

Before he dropped out of the project, Chip Chace mastered the nastiest piece of reconnaissance: a tension traverse below Pigeon Ledge that involved hook moves and tied-off knifeblades as intermediate anchors to cross a face covered with loose, blade-like flakes. He fixed a rope across this traverse, which Steve Levin and I would later jumar on a ground-up ascent we made, mixed free



The Free Nose of North Chasm View Wall, Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Colorado. Jeff Achey



Steve Levin on Pitch 7 (5.12). Jimmy Surette

and aid, over three days in October 1995—our first bottom-to-top tour of the route. I returned in November, just before the snows closed the canyon, with the French sport-climber Baptiste Briand, to free climb past this rope, placing several bolts on the way.

In April and early May, 1996, Levin and I began our final efforts to link the complete free climb. We had one week, and with Brian Morrato and Jimmy Surette, shot the footage for a documentary video. Compared to extreme free climbs on El Capitan, our ascent, with four sections of low-end 5.12, was moderate; but this was the Black Canyon, not Yosemite, and despite our illusions of grandeur, we weren't Alex Huber or Lynn Hill, but a couple of desk jockeys with a week off work.

Over a dozen trips, we had placed 20 protection bolts, about a third of these at belays. Trying to salvage our reputations after so much previewing, we placed all bolts on lead, from hooks or free stances. On May 3, we finished the filming, pulled all our ropes and then free climbed the route in a two-day push.

Some route directions: The *Free Nose* begins on the Goss-Logan, following that route, at 5.12, to its original pendulum point. Four independent pitches follow, two of them 5.12. These pitches include the problematical blank traverse from the orange dihedral to the prow of the Nose. Above, the free route joins Wiggins and Becker's line, which it follows—with one two-pitch variation—to the top.

No bolts were added to the Wiggins-Becker route, which yielded much run-out free climbing, as well as the technical crux, a 20-foot overhanging corner. We placed three bolts (with the blessing of Jim Logan, who still lives in Boulder and climbs harder than ever) in the orange dihedral, but no other existing pitch was retro-bolted. Most of the route is protected by natural gear.

The style I learned from my Black Canyon mentors—"a rope, rack, and the shirt on your back"—was hopeless on the *Nose*. Still, now that the obsession has run its course, I've wondered: What if we'd hauled a couple of weeks' supplies and just worked away till we topped out? Could we have found the route—any free route—without knowing about certain hidden features? Ground-up climbing would have bombarded the belayer with hundred-pound scabs of loose rock, but the rappelling wasn't much safer. We were lucky, and what we did worked, but I doubt our tactics on the *Nose* represent the wave of the future.

Below the rim of the Black Canyon lies true wilderness, difficult to reach, raw and untamed. To climb there is adventurous, but not in the same flashy, alpine-tinted way as the "destination" walls of Pakistan, Patagonia, or Baffin Island. Nor is this the climber's magic gymnasium, like Yosemite, with elegant granite waiting for exotic new free-climbing performances above crowds of milling spectators. A "sport" mentality will be frustrated in the Black by poison ivy, loose rock, bushes in the jamcracks, and too much "easy" climbing. It's more primitive here; the river roars, flakes of rock peel away and spin down into the shadows, swifts dive and swoop, a climber scrambles down and then back up again. It is a deep canyon, dark and spooky, a high-gravity zone, and hard to escape. If the climber has been pushed far enough, maybe deep into an obsession, he emerges changed, cleansed. For a precious few weeks, routes and lines disappear, and rock walls are just that.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Colorado

ROUTE: The *Free Nose* (2,000 feet, V 5.12b), begun October, 1995; final ascent: May 4-5, 1996 (Jeff Achey, Steve Levin)

PERSONNEL: Jeff Achey, Steve Levin, Chip Chace, Ginger Vaughn, Baptiste Briand