

contacted him, explained, and told him that I was sorry. He said that there were no hard feelings and he was glad we had a good time on the climb.

I had aid climbed Zodiac with my dad in early October. We passed the Huber brothers, who were working on the first free ascent. The free climbing in the middle of the route looked like some of the wildest climbing I had ever seen. I made plans to return over Thanksgiving with my friend Topher Donahue. With good weather I was able to free-climb the route over six days. Topher free-climbed all but three pitches. On both of my 2003 El Cap free-climbs, I climbed with partners who hoped to free-climb the routes. In both cases they abandoned their free-climbing goals to ensure that I was successful. I can't believe how lucky I am to have such great friends.

TOMMY CALDWELL, AAC

*El Capitan, Zodiac, warp speed and free variation.* After an exploratory ascent in spring 2002 with Valley local Ammon McNeely, I knew that the Zodiac could be climbed free. In spring 2003 my brother Thomas and I started working to free-climb it. We succeeded in doing all the moves free on a variation, but failed to do a continuous redpoint ascent. We planned to return in the fall to complete the redpoint, but did not leave before setting the speed record. After ascents in 4h07m and 3h08m, we climbed the Zodiac in 2h31m20s. This time was made possible by rigorous short fixing-tactics.

The continuous redpoint ascent finally happened at the beginning of October. In our quest for cooler conditions, however, we made one serious miscalculation: Zodiac gets no afternoon shade in the fall. We could only climb the friction-intensive crux pitches in early morning or late evening, when the sun was below the rim. This resulted in serious ledge time, the consumption of several books, and 68 hours needed for the redpoint—though the time spent actually climbing was no more than 18 hours.

Typical of El Cap routes, several sections of the original aid line did not go free. Our free variation begins 60m right of Zodiac, in the gray rock, and links various corners and ramps to meet Zodiac after four pitches. Another variation avoids the long bolt ladder on Zodiac's fifth pitch. This variation rejoins the original just before the short bolt ladder of the sixth pitch. The free crux lies in the heart of the Gray Circle, an El Cap landmark and the route's most conspicuous feature. The third Circle pitch involves a holdless 5.13+ stemming corner. Next comes the route's crux, the 5.13d Nipple pitch, so named for the arching fingertip pin-scar undercling that runs out the overhanging main wall and culminates at a point, the Nipple, where the crack widens abruptly to four inches, ending the difficulties. After that the doors are open, and the free line, more or less, follows the original line to the top.

ALEXANDER HUBER, *Germany*

## SIERRA NEVADA

*Ruby Wall Cirque, Boom Town and Billy from the Hills.* In June 2000 Jason Lakey and I completed a new route in the Ruby Wall Cirque in Little Lakes Valley above Rock Creek Lake. We climbed the main formation right of the descent gully used for Pteradon. [The third tower, with the second tower hosting the route Pteradon and the first being the main Ruby Wall—Ed.] Our