

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

route, Boom Town (IV 5.10b), was done ground-up, onsight, with no bolts drilled. The pitches are new except the first, where we found a drilled anchor at the ledge where the pitch ends. We were told by Mike Strassman that whoever did the first pitch went no farther. We returned during the summer of 2001 and did a route to the left of Boom Town. This route, Billy from the Hills (IV 5.10b C1), was also done ground-up, onsight, with a few moves of C1 at the end of the first pitch. We swung leads on both of the nine-pitch routes, using a 70m rope for both ascents. Two ropes are required for the descent for an overhanging 60m rappel to exit the gully. Rumor has it that Boom Town was the first route to have summited the formation.

DAVID LANE, AAC

Mt. Mills, Northwest Ridge. Jackie Carroll and I climbed this spectacular ridge in an unintended two-day push from Rock Creek Lake. From Mills Lake we crested the North Ridge of Mt. Mills, only to find that our dog had followed us over 4th class ground. Sending her back to camp, we crossed the ridge and descended via one rappel into the Fourth Recess. We crossed Fourth Recess and began Mills's northwest ridge where the divide between the Fourth and Third Recesses meet the ridge. (One could add to the adventure by starting the ridge between this point and Third Recess Peak, undoubtedly a Grade V, or climb one of the Grade IV's on Third Recess Peak to access the ridge.) Airy class 5 climbing led over several gendarmes and knife-edge arêtes for many pitches, including an exposed 5.8 overhanging mantle. Beyond several large towers, a gap in the ridge required a short rappel. We thought the ridge would become easier, but no. Exposed climbing on the north side of the ridge (and a tunnel inside the ridge) past snow-covered ledges and ice-filled cracks found us below the summit plateau at nightfall. Without sleeping bags, food, or water, we shivered the night away in below-freezing temperatures, summiting at 8 a.m. the next day. We descended the chute to the north of the standard 3rd class route, which we found horribly loose and sandy for a standard route, necessitating belays and short-roping. The dog greeted us at the base after spending an epic night on the north ridge, and we arrived in camp at sunset the following day. We rated the route IV 5.8. Total number of pitches was around 20.

MIKE STRASSMAN, AAC

Birch Mountain, north ridge, attempt and tragedy. I had scoped out a line on this long ridge and questioned Sierra veteran Doug Robinson as to whether it had been ascended. He became secretive, and, probing further, I discovered that he also intended to make the first ascent that spring. We decided to do it together, but I live in the eastern Sierra and he doesn't, so I went without him. On the first attempt we didn't even leave the car, as a spring snowstorm had the ridge looking like K2. The second attempt, with Cindy Springer, showed what a long winter it had been. One look at the slog up the 2,000 feet of talus from base camp turned that trip into a reconnaissance. On the third attempt, in mid-July, I was in better shape and had enlisted the rope-gun talents of mountain guide Seth Dilles. A last-minute addition to the party was Keith Kramer, a long-time big-wall partner of Seth's from Yosemite. I feared that three on a rope might make the ridge a difficult undertaking to achieve in one day, but Seth felt that Keith was strong enough and experienced enough to move quickly. A recent fire had made the approach up Birch Creek relatively easy, but the 2,000-foot talus slog was another matter. Keith began