

**Climbing at  
Wasootch Slabs**

**Ben Gadd**





*Part of Wasootch Slabs, viewed from the east.*

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*Cover: climbing route 31 on Steps Pinnacle.*

## EVER BEEN TO WASOOTCH SLABS?

Wasootch (pronounced *wah-SOOCH*) Slabs is a line of short cliffs in the Kananaskis region of the Rocky Mountains, about an hour's drive west of Calgary. In spite of its small size, Wasootch is a popular climbing spot. There are some 50 one-pitch routes for leading or top-roping, the climbing is varied on good limestone, the slabs face southwest (giving a long climbing season), and the approach is the easiest in the region: five minutes from the car, walking on level ground. This last feature is *especially* appealing.

## HOW TO GET THERE

From the west edge of Calgary, take the TransCanada Highway west for 47km, turning south on Alberta 40 toward the province's Kananaskis Country recreational area. Follow the paved road for 24km, turning left onto a minor, unpaved track shortly after passing a sign marking Porcupine Creek. A half-kilometre down this track, park in a large clearing next to some gravel piles (if they're still there; don't park next to them if they're gone). Walk up the valley past the piles, and you'll see the rocks coming into view on your left. The spire high on the right side of the valley is Wasootch Tower; the creek on the valley floor (when running) is Wasootch Creek.

## TRUE FACTS

Derived from the Stoney Indian word *wazi* ("one"), *wasootch* denotes singularity, uniqueness, solitariness. The origin of the place name is not documented, but Stoney sources living at the nearby settlement of Morley suggest that the name reflects the presence of the tower in the valley.

Climbing at Wasootch began in the 1950s, when the Canadian army began mountain warfare training there. The large letters painted at the bases of the various slabs are (obviously) military-inspired; they are handy identifiers and I've used them in this guide.

## GEOLOGY

The slabs are part of the Palliser Formation, a thick Devonian limestone bed that weathers into cliffs all over the Canadian Rockies. When climbing on the slabs, you are using holds that were sea-bottom lime mud 350 million years ago. The steeply tilted climbing surfaces were originally flatlying bedding planes, raised 1500m above sea level and bent upward to the northeast during the creation of the Rocky Mountains about 60 million years ago. Over the last million years, ice-age glaciers have cut away overlying softer layers to expose the relatively erosion-resistant Palliser limestone, which forced the glaciers to cut the straight, northwest/southeast valley of Wasootch Creek in alignment with the slabs. As the glacier retreated upstream and melted, glacial meltwater and heavy runoff from storms carpeted the valley floor with a layer of gravel that may be about 10m thick at the slabs. This was a fortunate occurrence, because 10m of extra climbing would make most of the slabs slightly more than one rope-length in height.

One last geological note: some of the routes at Wasootch follow fault planes. If you're climbing on a very smooth, curving slab of rock that abuts a tight, crackless corner, you're probably climbing along a fault.

## BOTANY

For people who like to know the names of things, here are some of the common plants at Wasootch. Most of the trees on the rocks are lodgepole pines (long needles in bushy fronds; *Pinus contorta*), Engelmann spruce (short, square needles; *Picea engelmanni*), and alpine firs (soft, flat needles; smooth, grey bark; *Abies lasiocarpa*). There are a few whitebark pines (like lodgepole, but with squatter cones and smoother bark; *Pinus albicaulis*) and some very gnarled, very old Douglas-firs (deeply furrowed brown bark, cones with little tongues sticking out of them; *Pseudotsuga*). Many of these cliff-dwelling trees have been stunted by their cold, dry, windy location; yet, this location has also protected them from the fires that are common in the Kananaskis region.

At the base of the slabs, mixed with Engelmann spruce and lodgepole pines, you'll find thickets of western white birch trees (peeling white and burnt-orange bark; *Betula papyrifera*); smaller, shrub-like ground birches (reddish-brown bark that doesn't peel, smaller leaves than white birch but similar; *Betula occidentalis*), and lots of balsam poplar (smooth, yellow-grey bark that is furrowed on the trunks of older trees; large, green leaves; *Populus balsamifera*) mixed with aspens (like balsam poplar, but smaller, rounded leaves and no furrowing on the trunks; *Populus tremuloides*).

Among the anonymous knee-high greenery, a few kinds of shrubs stand out. Two species of juniper grow here: a sharp-needled, bushy type called *Juniperus communis*,\* and a soft-needled, ground-hugging type called *Juniperus horizontalis*. Both kinds have the distinctive juniper odor and the same blue berries that taste like gin.

Hauling up on any shrub is bad form in climbing, but you will especially want to avoid using wild roses (spiny stems, oval leaves, big pink-to-white flowers, *Rosa acicularis*) and equally prickly gooseberries (three-lobed leaves, small greenish flowers, *Ribes oxycanthoides*).

Another common shrub on and around the slabs is cinquefoil (Americans take note: in Canada you have to say *SANK-fwah* instead of *SIN-kwah-foil*; this is a bilingual country). It's identified by its shreddy brown bark, spiky-looking (but soft) little leaves, and pretty yellow flowers that bloom all summer (*Potentilla fruticosa*).

The ledges at Wasootch were originally covered with kinnikinnick (pronounced as spelled, only quickly): a carpeting plant of small, glossy green leaves that blooms in little pink bells and produces mealy red berries in the fall (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*). Don't confuse kinnikinnick with yellow mountain avens (*Dryas drummondii*), whose job is to cover the stones on the valley floor. Avens have

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\*Known to right-wing botanists as *red juniper*.

notched leaves that are dark green on one side and silvery grey on the other. The flowers have short yellow petals and hang upside down. After blooming, they produce plumes of cottony seeds. The avens have a hard life out there on the gravel flats; sympathize by not walking on them or having lunch all over them. Likewise, go gently on the kinnikinnick ledges to avoid creating more mini-mudflats on the slabs.

Wildflower-identifiers: bring your Peterson or your Porsild or your Cormack; there are too many herbaceous plants at the slabs to cover them here. Except for one, of special interest to climbers: the pasque flower (*Anemone patens*, known outside the mountains as the prairie crocus). If you're at the slabs early in spring, when the snow is still melting off, you may discover lovely tulip-like pasque flowers poking out of cracks that yesterday were iced up; this is a sure sign that rockclimbing season is on.

## BE NICE TO THE PLANTS. THEY WERE THERE FIRST.

Wasootch Slabs is a rockclimber's garden of trees, shrubs, ground-covering plants, and wildflowers. The place should be treated with care; years of boot-stomping and rappel-rope pulling have destroyed a lot of vegetation. The big ledge on D-slab, for example, used to have several trees on it. Be nice to the trees; they're useful. It's okay to tie in to them, to use them as runners, or even to practice rappels from them, *provided* that any tree chosen is at least 15cm thick (for safety) and that the rope runs through a carabiner rather than around the bare trunk. Pulling a rappel rope down from around a tree does the same thing to the tree that it would do to your leg.

## DRINKING WATER

Wasootch Creek is usually dry, but there is a reliable spring across from the slabs. It issues from a large, gravelly bowl in the hillside, dribbling down to the valley floor and disappearing among the stones. This spring is good entertainment for small children, and it keeps your beer cold.

## CLIMBING LIKE THE LOCALS

Wasootch is a practice cliff, so it gets used mainly by Calgary climbers tuning up in the spring, by new climbers (often in classes or informal groups), by rescue groups, and by experienced climbers from non-calcareous regions who are trying to get used to limestone—a strange and scary medium for persons familiar with good granite and crack climbing. If your first F7 limestone lead has left your knuckles white and your mind squishy, why not do some climbing at Wasootch until you can tell the rotten flakes from the good ones?

Rockies limestone climbers get by on about a dozen keystone-shaped nuts (which stay in limestone cracks better than hex types) up to about the 5cm size. In addition, on multi-pitch routes of F6 or harder, most people carry a couple of Lost Arrows and small angle pegs to blast into those peculiar wavy cracks that won't take nuts.

But don't drive pitons at Wasootch, unless you intend to leave them there. Limestone is soft, splitty rock that ruins quickly under pegging; on a limestone practice cliff, driving and pulling pegs is quite destructive and a no-no. Rocky Mountain climbing ethics are pretty easy on pitons, so if you find one in place, just leave it alone (at Wasootch or anywhere else) because the next party up may be counting on it being there. Likewise, don't chop out bolts. The few emplaced at Wasootch Slabs are for belays, rescue practice, or protection of some very nice climbing that would be ground-fall dangerous otherwise.

Helmets are standard on Canadian Rockies cliffs, composed as they are of heapstone, bombstone, etc. Yet, at Wasootch, you can have the pleasure of helmetless leading. Climbing second, though, or top-roping, I always wear mine: rubble on ledges and atop every route can brain you. So take care when climbing up or scrambling down above stupid people having lunch at the base of the cliffs. If you bring your kids, make them stay away (they'll spend their time happily on the gravel piles, anyway).

## RATING CLIMBS

Here's the Calgary-area rating system. It's actually part of the NCCS (National Climbing Classification System) imported from the United States but (strangely) seldom used there.

- F1 - Easy walking. The path from the parking lot to the rocks.
- F2 - Steep and gravelly walking, like the descent trails, but you don't need your hands except when falling down.
- F3 - Hands needed, and somewhere to fall to, but seldom roped. The descent-gully routes.
- F4 - Difficult enough or exposed enough to be roped, in case the leader desires protection. But he/she usually doesn't.
- F5 - Occasional protected moves, on good holds. Lots of climbing at Wasootch in this category.
- F6 - Steeper rock, thinner holds—steadily protected moves. Again, many routes at Wasootch in this category.
- F7 - Insecure climbing requiring a confident leader. Protection essential, and available on most F7 routes at Wasootch.
- F8 - Awkward moves on poor holds. Requires an above-average leader and secure protection.
- F9 - Very insecure climbing, and at Wasootch, not very well protected on the only F9 pitch.  
But short F9 variations on other routes can be made.  
Some climbers have been able to find F10 moves here and there; these are always called F9 by the next climber up.

## SUGGESTED ROUTES

A good sequence of getting-in-shape routes, all protectable and on good rock, would be 21 (varied F5 moves), 25 (F6 juggy overhangs), 50 (F6 layback corner), 32 (varied F6, with jamming), 22 (upper-end F6), 30 (slab & F7 layback move), and 23 (Wasootch-classic stem corner).

The outstanding representatives of various climbing techniques are 43 (slabs), 50 (layback), and 23 (stemming). Long jam cracks are rare in Rockies limestone and there



*Typical overweight, out-of-shape climber being helped over to the slabs for his first climb of the season.*

are none at Wasootch. For overhangs, try 28 or 38.

The practice aspect makes for lots of top-roping at Wasootch, but the place really excels for confidence-building leads. You can start in the morning, leading easy and well-protected routes; by afternoon, you'll be ready to try some of the harder ones—which range from well-protected to suicidal.

## ROUTE DESCRIPTIONS

The emphasis here is on the *line routes* at Wasootch Slabs, including cracks, corners, grooves, flakes—any linked group of holds that amounts to a route of 15m or more. The popular slab climbs, which do not follow lines but use friction, solution cups, and small flakes, are also included. There are many slabs lying between lines, of course, that are worth exploring—but don't expect to find protection.

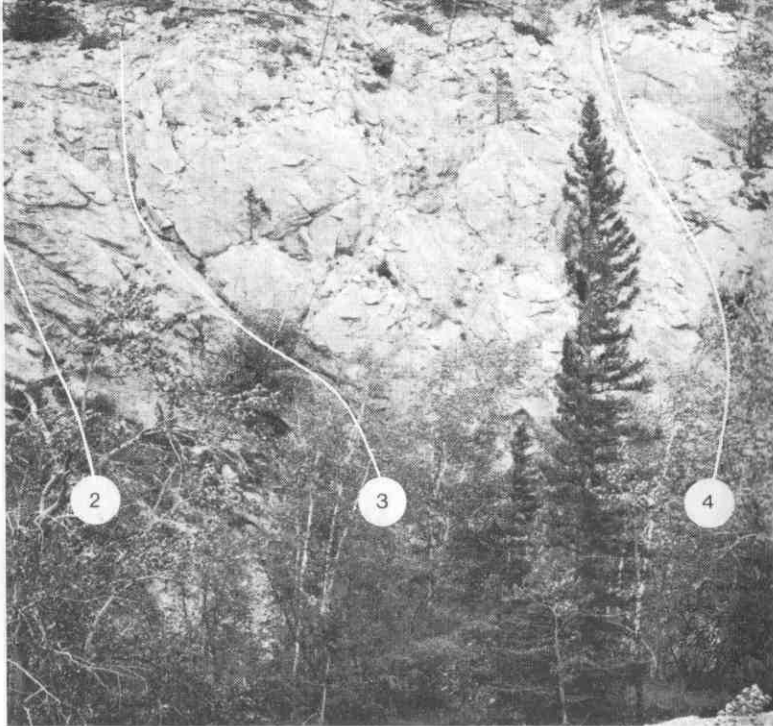
Fifty routes are described from west to east along the cliffs. Each is rated by its hardest move and measured to the nearest five metres. If protection is not mentioned in a route description, assume that nuts will work on that pitch; poorly protected routes are noted. Chances are, the number of fixed pegs and bolts will increase at Wasootch, making the place safer. This seems okay: who wants to take a ground fall at a practice area? And better protection encourages people to lead rather than mindlessly top-roping everything.

FIRST ROCK (small rock near parking lot)

1 Broken corner next to slab. Nut belay at top. F4, 15m

The slab to the right is unprotected F8.



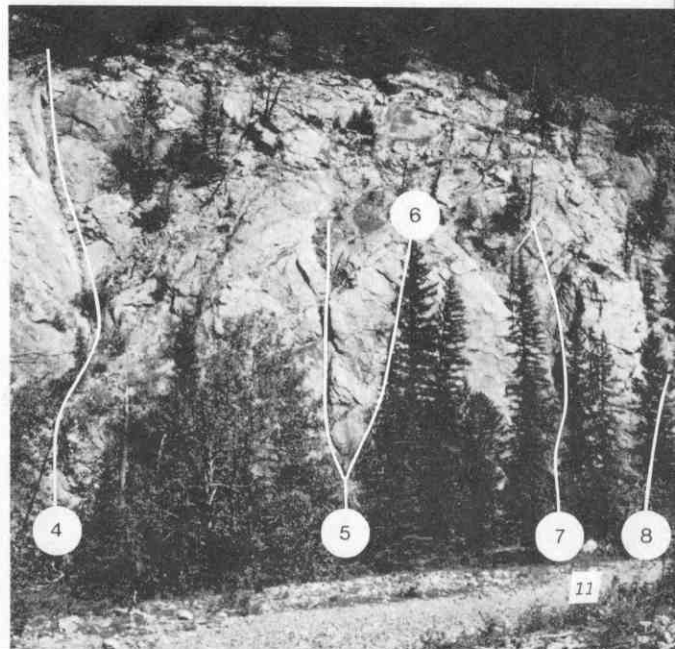


#### SECOND ROCK, LEFT SIDE

- 2 Slab, easy overhang, groove. F4, 30m
- 3 Long, pleasant layback. Stemming at the top. F5, 45m  
The hillside at the top has lots of loose rock on it.
- 4 Short slab at the start, then a scramble leading to a fault-line groove at the top. F4, 50m

#### SECOND ROCK, RIGHT SIDE

- 5 Short, unprotected F7 slab, starting at the apex of a small scree cone. Then left to the easier, broken corner above. 35m
- 6 Start route 5, but angle right above the slab to an F6 break. 35m
- 7 Nasty corner lurking 20m right of route 6. Nuts don't work; takes balls instead. Start left of the corner on a loose, flaky slab, moving into the corner higher up. Poor tree belay in the gully above. F8, 20m
- 8 Broken crack around the corner (right) of route 7. F5, 15m



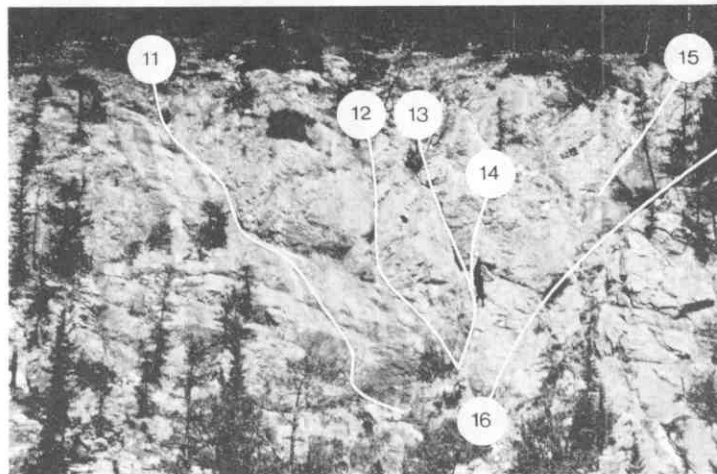




△ A-SLAB (not a slab, really, but two broken corners)

9 Unprotected F6 slab start, then into the easier corner above, pulling up from ledge to ledge through trees. 40m

10 Start on right edge of slab, then up a short ramp to the left, then right again to the trees and up the easy corner, minding loose blocks. F5, 45m



△ WHITE-STREAK SLAB

To the right of A-slab is an interesting, lumpy wall with lots of poorly protected fault-line climbs on it.

11 The white streak. Scramble up to a nut-anchored belay right of the bottom of the white streak under a short vertical wall. Up the wall (unprotected F6) and follow the streak up the slab (unprotected F5). Atop the slab, move left into a protected (finally) F5 stem corner, loose at the top. 30m

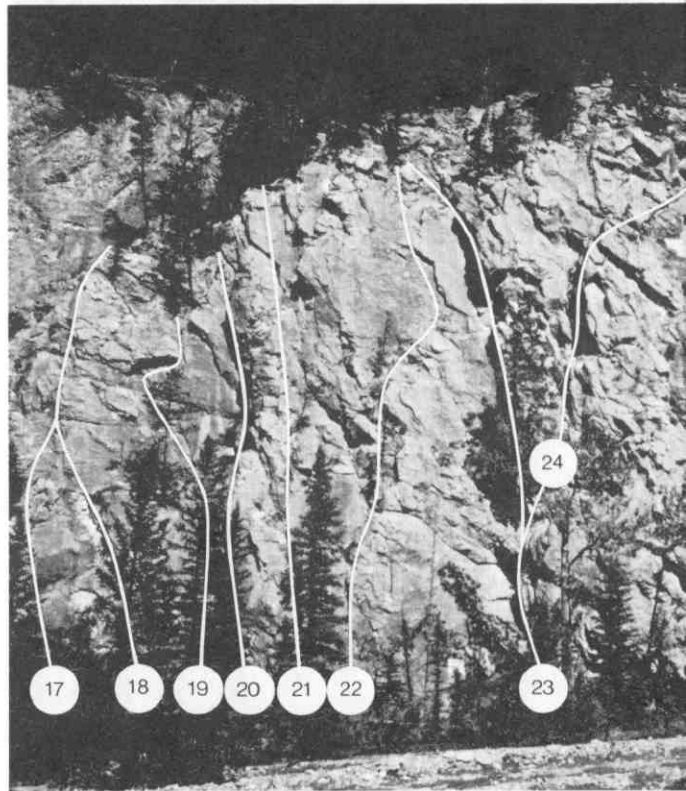


- 12 Unprotected F6 fault-line corner; a bit loose, too. 20m
- 13 Like route 12.
- 14 The ear. F5 past an ear of rock (keep left of it).  
A short route starting partway up the descent gully  
(route 16). 15m
- 15 Layback ramp paralleling the descent gully on the left,  
near the top. F5, 15m
- 16 Descent gully. F3

#### B-SLAB AND LEFT

The rock here is very good, with nut cracks. Popular routes in this section.

- 17 Take the easy crack between the detached pinnacle and the wall (the right side), traversing right at the trees and following the juggy buttress to the top. F4, 30m
- 18 Start right of the pinnacle, stepping off a block, then up and left to hit the buttress of route 17. F4, 30m
- 19 Undercling and layback, worth doing. Take a short F5 groove up to a tree-protected slab, moving up and left across it to a ledge under the overhang. Stuff a nut under the overhang, then undercling right and layback the right edge (F6). 25m
- 20 Long layback. Start up a steep, prickly-limestone corner (F6), then through easier flakes and up the F6 corner above, which is juggy on the right wall. 35m
- 21 Tree-in-the-crack. Tricky start to gain a short crack with a small tree in it. No fair grabbing the tree! Easy climbing up the slabs above into a corner, which can be taken at its left side, and up a crescent-shaped crack to the top (F5, good nuts) or at the right side (F6 stemming, poor nuts). 40m



B-slab

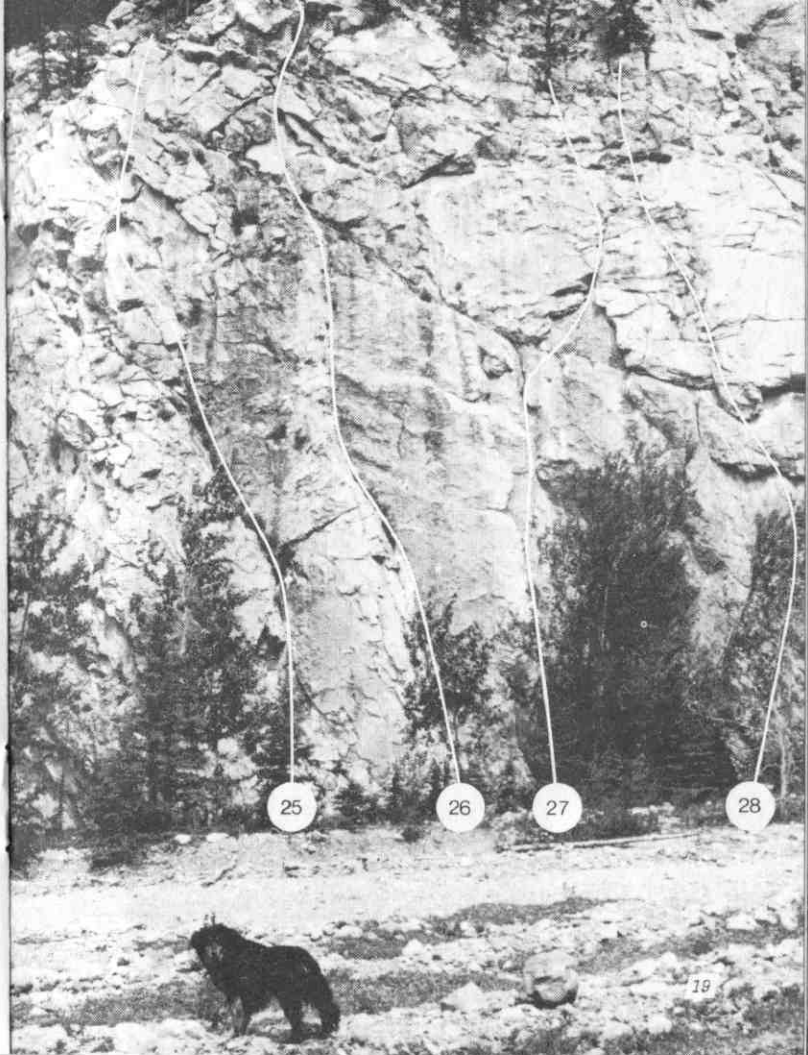


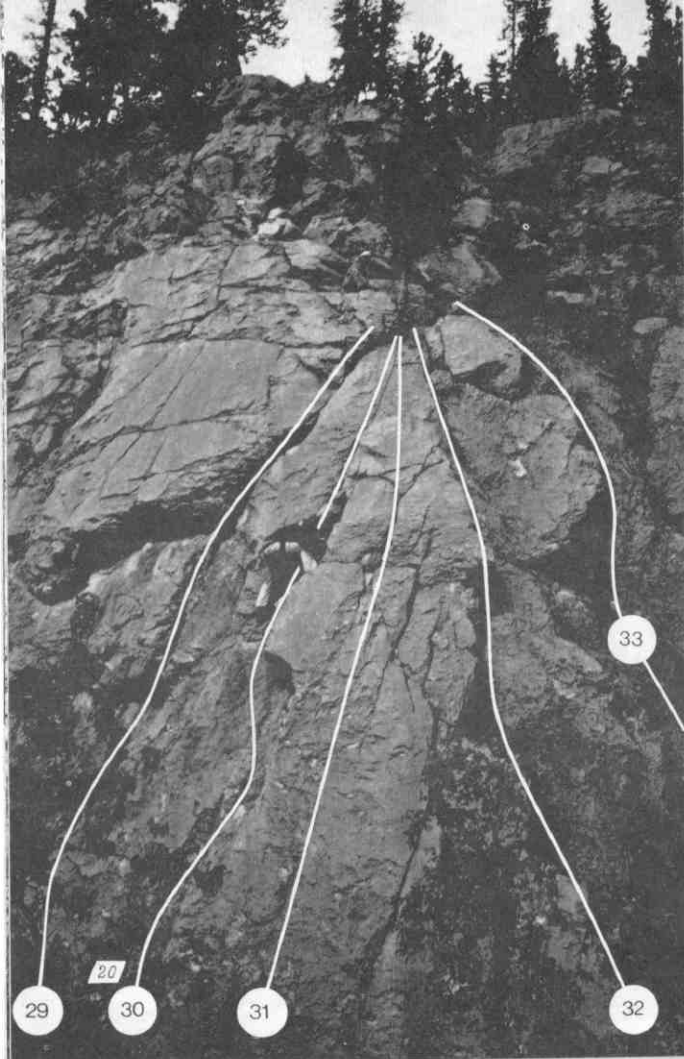
- 22 Obvious flake high up, just left of the Funnel. Start of few metres right of route 21, swinging up a shallow, flaky corner (unprotected F6) to easier, tree-protected climbing above. Pull up onto the upper slab and tip-toe right to the base of the big flake. Take the left side of the flake (good medium nut), pulling over it where it becomes a small overhang. Continue on rounded holds to the top. 40m
- 23 The Funnel. The only named route at Wasootch and the local classic. Start at the letter B up a short, slippery layback to an overhang capped by a tree. Pass the overhang easily on the right and you're into the smooth corner—the Funnel proper—which you may have to start by chimneying against the tree. Eventually the tree gets too far from the wall and you'll have to start stemming (F7), using dimples and off-balance holds with rather feeble nuts. Small ledges give a rest under the crux alcove at the top, plus your last protection. Struggle up into the alcove until it looks possible to lunge left for the mantel-ledge finish. F8 if you make it. Some people chimney their way out, putting their backs against the overhanging right wall of the alcove and groping for jugs when things close off. 40m
- 24 Escape from the Funnel. From the chimney-tree (or even before) you can move right to a steep but juggy F5 route that empties, after an overhang, onto an easy ramp to the top. 45m

## THE CORNERS

Right of the Funnel is the steepest wall at Wasootch. There are three corners here, all facing southeast.

- 25 First corner. Start by taking an intimidating overhang on the right (easier than it looks, with a good nut under it). Follow the bushy corner above up to some blocky overhangs. Move left, stemming and jamming up with good nuts to an easy ramp finish. Or shun the ramp, place a small nut, and take an airy slab straight to the top. F6, 35m
- 26 Second corner. F7 and poorly protected. Stem the small corner, moving around the left edge onto harder moves as the corner peters out at a ledge. Pull up through a protected F6 overhang to the top. 40m F7,
- 27 Third corner. F9 and poorly protected. If you find bolts on this route (or anywhere else at Wasootch), leave them in for people who like to lead this sort of thing without killing themselves if they fall. Stem up, the holds getting thinner as you get higher. Bridge between two flakes and swing up on a left-hand pocket hold to a resting spot. Hoo-wee! Move right, under an overhang, and pull through the centre to easier going up a broken line in the slab above. 35m
- 28 Ramp and overhangs. A short, southwest-facing corner leads to the ramp. Climb off the ramp at the first weakness in the overhang above. Mantel strenuously up (F8), moving left below the next overhang until you can pull over it on flakes. Follow a broken section in the slab above as the difficulty eases. Or, if you're not tired yet, try the F9 slab to the right. 35m
- 29 The ramp near the start of route 28 leads to a crack passing right of two overhangs, the first protected by a good nut and the second unprotected, loose F7. The crack continues to the tree above Steps Pinnacle and works better for your feet than for your hands. 25m





#### STEPS PINNACLE

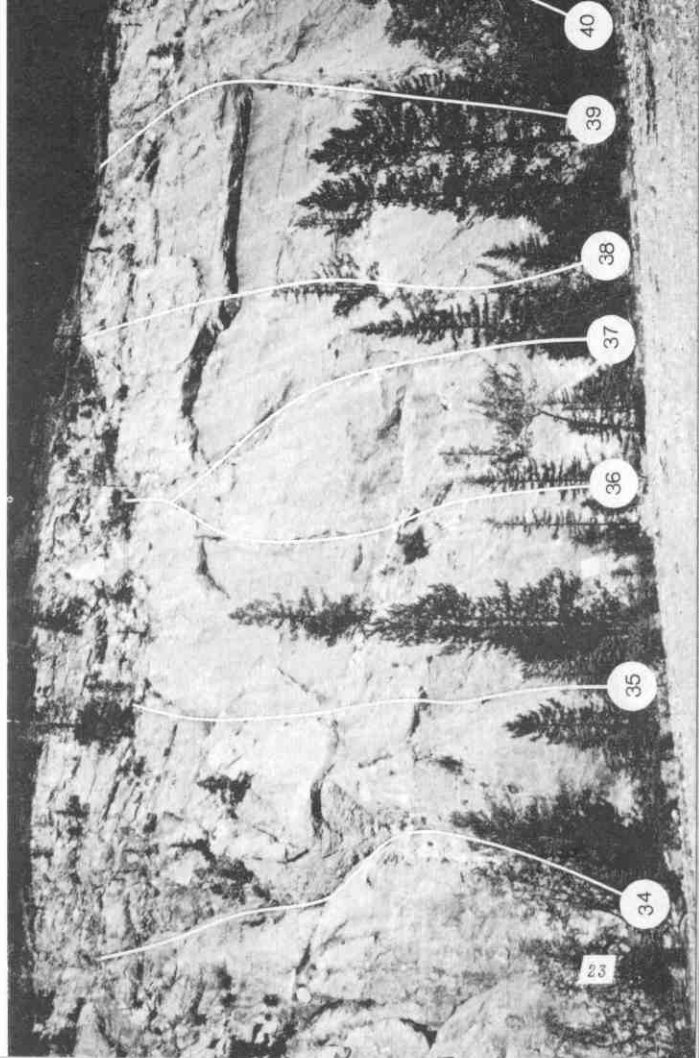
There are several short but worthwhile climbs on this pinnacle, all crossing the same problematic slab at the top.

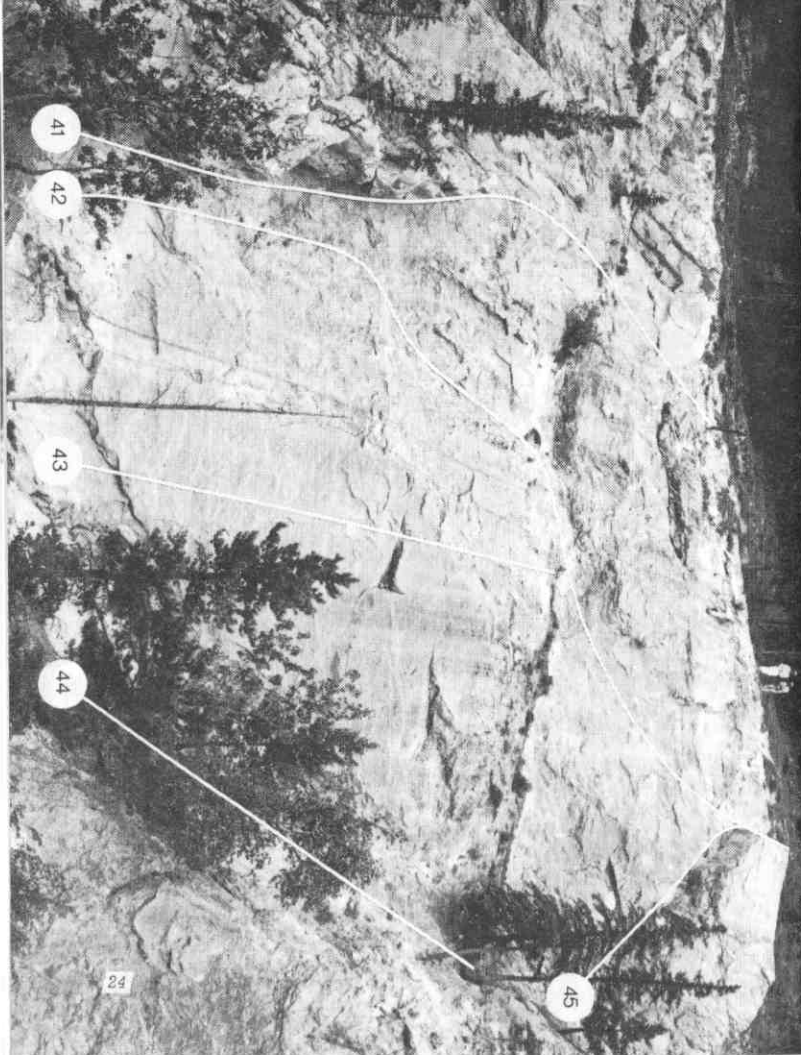
- 30 Steps left. Climb a short F6 slab to the crack and small overhang that delineate the left side of the pinnacle. Slip a nut under the overhang and layback (F7) to another nut-protected move around a loose block. To get over the final slab to the tree, pop in a small nut on the right and tip-toe, stem, jam, or leap for the top. 20m
- 31 Steps centre. Use the fingery cracks and flakes in the difficult lower section to get onto the easier stuff higher up. Small-nut protection, F8, 20m.
- 32 Steps right. Harder than it looks, but still only F6. Layback and jam the steep section off the last step.
- 33 The unprotected F8 stem corner just right of route 32 leads to an F7 overhanging flake. 25m

## C-SLAB

A large, proper slab with several surprisingly protectable lines among the crackless expanse.

- 34 At the left edge, an F4 gully leads from the base of Steps Pinnacle to an F5 fault-plane slab that continues as a groove to the top. 45m. The lower part is an easy route to or from the top of Steps Pinnacle.
- 35 Start at a shallow F6 corner. Turn a small overhang on the right, following the easier shallow corner above to an F6 slab finish to the right. Or sneak off to the left. 45m
- 36 The pancake, left side. Start a few metres right of the letter C, using a slab to connect with the flaky line above. It goes F6 with so-so nuts up to a small tree (too small for protection; leave it alone so it can grow bigger and be useful). The finish is unprotected but easy on the right. Belay on nuts at the top. 45m
- 37 The pancake, right side. Again, connect with a line of flakes that goes F5 up and left, joining route 36 near the top. 45m
- 38 Overhang direct. This is a slab route rather than a line. Climb unprotected F6 slabs to the overhang, clipping into a bolt (still there, you hope) under the overhang at the point where it puckers downward. Pull over and pick your way up the bolt-protected F6 slab above. 45m
- 39 Overhang, right end. Unprotected F5. Take a slab to the easy, right-angling groove heading for the right end of the overhang. Step out right at the end of the groove, moving back left above. 50m
- 40 Descent gully from the top of the pinnacle that separates C-slab and D-slab.





#### D-SLAB

Dis is D slab for top-roped fun in the sun and rappel practice. A big ledge 30m up has bolts for belaying. The crackless part of the slab is F6 and F7 on ripples, nubbins, and friction. You can solo up to the ledge on route 44. A steep trail runs around the right edge of E-slab to the top of D-slab.

- 41 Left-leaning F4 corner. Not steep, but rather loose on the left wall. Off the top, you can continue up F5 slabs. 20m
- 42 Just right of route 41, a bolt-protected line of F5 holds leads up and gently right to the big belay ledge. From the ledge, it's unprotected F5 up and right across slabs to the top. 50m total.
- 43 The big ledge direct. One bolt for protection about halfway up. F6, 30m
- 44 Descent gully. F3 from the right edge of the big ledge, using odd pocket holds. 20m
- 45 From the trees at the right end of the big ledge, follow the curving base of the overhanging block up and left. Slabs and layback moves. F6, 20m

#### E-SLAB (minor rock just right of D-slab; no photo)

- 46 A shallow groove in the centre leads to two parallel cracks further up, either of which is F5. 25 m
- 47 Around to the right, a short corner is F3 for 20 m.



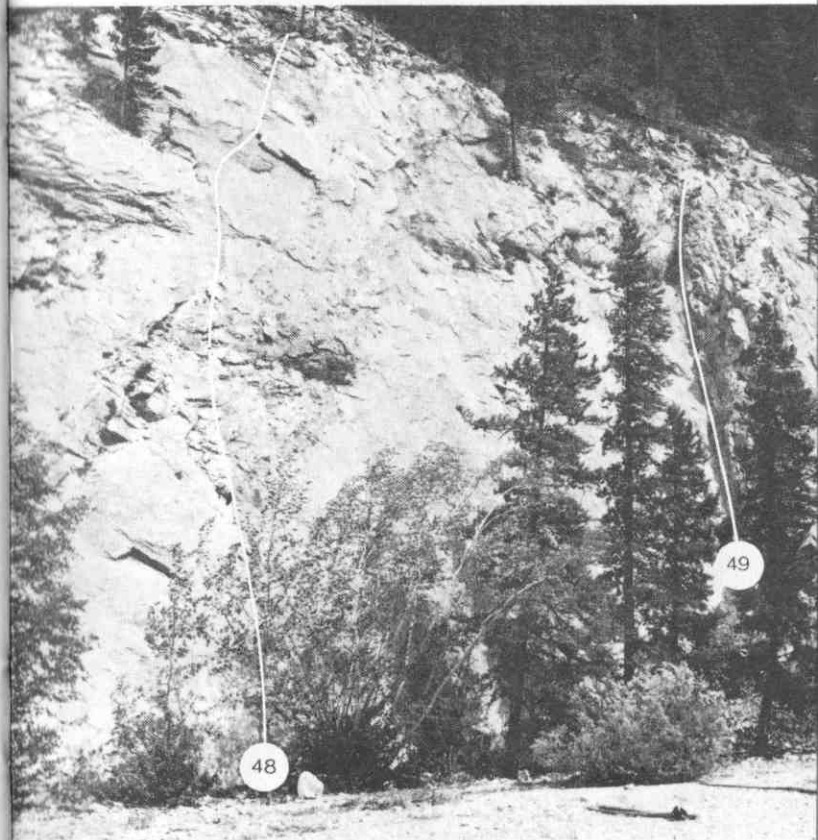
## F-SLAB

A good, steep slab. Mostly top-roped, though there is a protectable route on it.

48 Climb up into a shallow, southeast-facing corner and follow it (F5, tricky nut placements) to an F6 slab. Move up and left to place a runner at the left edge of the slab. Traverse to the right toward a flake, passing it on the left with good nuts. Finish the slab above. 45m

49 The bushy corner on the right edge of the slab is F4, 35m.

- ▷ Last minute flash ! For the scare of a lifetime, repeat the sensational F9 ascent up the centre of F-slab. Two bolts low down point the way towards the unprotected upper part, which is very hard. So is the ground at the bottom. Adding some more bolts - on lead, of course - would be a good idea, no?





## G-SLAB

This is the last (most easterly) slab and it hasn't been climbed much. It's also small and heavily overgrown. *BUT* there is a fine little climb here.

50 Classic layback corner. Scramble up through the trees right of the letter *G* to the base of this inviting route. Layback up on super nut protection, doing a vertical bit at the top. F6, 20m

*We was lying around at the slabs, bragging and that, when this guy showed up. Cowboy hat, pack sack, dog. Doesn't say nothing. Takes a pair of EBs out of the pack, puts them on, and starts soloing everything.*

*He finally gets tired and almost falls off, so he comes down, puts away the boots, calls his dog and walks away.*

*We're standing around with our mouths hanging open, of course. Who was this guy? I still don't know. All he left behind was this here silver bullet.*

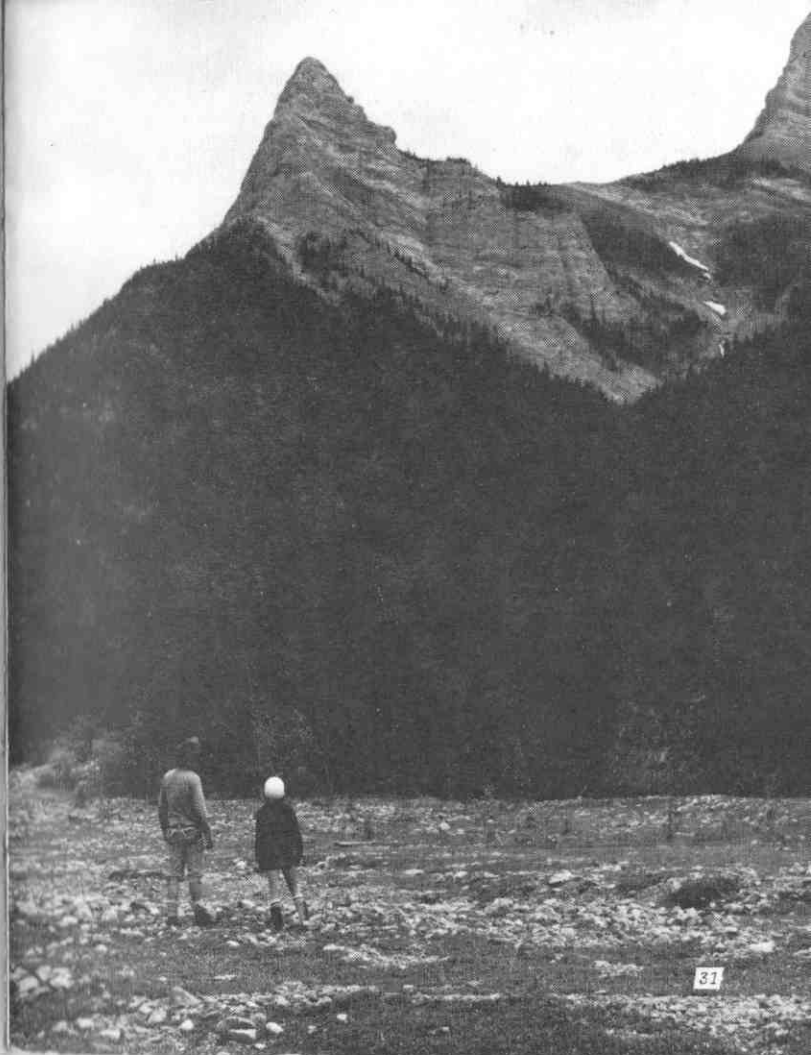
— As related to F.H. Brown

## WASOOTCH TOWER

It's hard to ignore the tower when writing about the slabs below. First climbed in 1952 by Hans Gmoser (a guide) and five others in the same party (Jim Tarrant, John Manry, Isabel Spreat, W. Henson, and Philippe de la Salle, if you must know), the original route is on the south side, directly up from the col. It's short (one or two leads), loose, and easy (F5).

The north ridge of the tower, the longest route, was done in 1968 by Charlie Locke, Gordon Rathbone, John Martin, and Stu Slymon. Six to eight pitches of mostly F4 and F5 climbing, with one F6 pitch at the base, on good rock. Start a little to the left of the north ridge after scrambling as high as possible; move back onto the ridge after passing a steep, downsloping section on the first or second pitch.

If you just want to get to the top as easily as possible, it can be done in only one pitch of F4 climbing, followed by an exposed F3 traverse along the shattered northern crest of the tower to the more hospitable central summit. From the slabs, take the usually dry creek on the right (northwest) side of the tower until stopped by a waterfall (or the dry-slab equivalent) at the base. Scramble up the left side of the falls, moving back into the streambed above or moving up through the trees on the left side. The stream becomes a loose gully higher up, best avoided (especially in groups with klutzy members who kick down rocks) by taking the right bank through thinning trees to the timberline col abutting the tower on the southwest. Level with the col, follow large, scree-covered ledges to the north, under the bulging cliffs of the summit block. Just before emerging on the north ridge, note the concave slab ending at a small grove of trees. Climb up the right side, moving further right at the top and up to a sloping, scree-covered slab. Belay partway up the right side of the slab, taking care not to send rocks down on anyone below. At the top of the slab, scramble carefully along the left (east) side of the crest on ledges, probably belaying because the traverse ends by climbing up a few metres of the worst rock anywhere to reach the broad summit. No fires or littering up top, please; it's a pristine and singular place—especially in a thunderstorm.



To get off, there is a two-rope rappel off the west side from the summit block, but if you can't see the finish you should reverse your ascent route as far as the bottom of the scree-covered slab. Here, instead of rappelling off a tiny tree which I hope still exists there, look to your right (as you face outward from the cliff; left if you face in) and note the saddle-like projection of rock at the base of the slab. On the north side is a pocket that you can scramble into; in the pocket is a well-driven, ring-angle rappel piton. You can make it down to the base of the concave slab on a 40m rope.

#### THANK YOU ...

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