
Low Impact Climbing in Vertical Wilderness

By Jesse McGahey

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Sometimes called the “Granite Crucible” by climbers, Yosemite has always been a place where concentrated forces interact to influence advances and developments, not just the techniques and equipment we use, but also the code of ethics we follow. John Muir, the father of the American preservation movement and a Yosemite climber, bagged the first ascent of Cathedral Peak in 1869. In 1958 the father of big-wall-wine-drinking and siege tactics, Warren Harding, first climbed El Cap via The Nose route using thousands of feet of fixed ropes, 45 days of climbing, and 125 bolts. Starting with the 2nd ascent of The Nose, Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, and others led the change from siege to “alpine” tactics—fewer bolts, fewer fixed ropes, and fewer pitons when “clean” protection is available.

Designated as Federal Wilderness by Congress in 1984, Yosemite big walls have a higher level of legal protection than the Valley floor. The Wilderness Act mandates the National Park Service (NPS) to protect wilderness character—distinguished by pristine undeveloped nature, self-reliance, unrestricted freedom and adventure, no permanent structures or installations, and an absence of conveniences. David Brower and other climbers helped shape this legislation. Brower, a prominent Yosemite mountaineer in the 30s and 40s, was the director of the Sierra club in the 50s and 60s and his leadership helped to win the passage of the Act in 1964. The Yosemite climber should embrace the ideals of wilderness, and the development of big wall ethics over the last half-century show that, by and large, we have done so. Most climbers in Yosemite now minimize the placement of bolts and fixed ropes, they avoid using a hammer or altering the rock, they pack out their human waste and garbage, and they volunteer to help keep Yosemite’s wilderness clean and unaltered—preserving a high quality experience for their fellow climbers today as well as climbers in the future.

However, some climbers are still unaware of wilderness ethics, and a few others just seem not to care. The actions of this minority, intentional or not, tarnish the image of the entire climbing community and negate our efforts to maintain the wilderness character. In 2010 alone, climbing rangers removed thousands of feet of fixed rope and several abandoned poop tubes from the walls, and—just from Camp VI on The Nose—enough trash and human waste to fill three large haulbags (and there is still much more). They also removed dozens of new fire rings constructed by climbers and hundreds of pounds of garbage and abandoned equipment from the base and summit of the Valley walls. Other park users and NPS managers are sensitive to abuse of the park, and unquestionably the best way to continue maintaining climber freedoms and limiting regulations is for us to join them as caretakers of Yosemite. The following guidelines should be part of our ethics as climbers, but they are also backed up by National Park Service regulations.

Wilderness Permits and Camping

Although Yosemite’s walls are within Wilderness, Wilderness Permits are not required for overnight routes as of 2010. However, camping anywhere else in designated Wilderness requires a Wilderness Permit, and all applicable Leave No Trace (LNT) principles and rules must be followed: store food in bear canisters, camp and wash at least 100 feet from trails and water sources, build campfires only in established fire rings, bury human waste 6–8 inches underground or pack it out, and carry out all trash. Spending the night on top of El Capitan after climbing a wall is considered part of the climb, but please follow the LNT rules above and only build a fire in emergency situations. Trees are being stripped of branches and dead-and-down wood is needed to regenerate the scarce organic soils. Camping at the base of any wall in Yosemite Valley—including El Capitan—is prohibited. This rule may seem unfair, but when you consider

that the park gets over 4 million visitors a year including thousands of climbers, and that the base of El Capitan is only a short walk from the road, it's not hard to imagine the junk show that would ensue. Camping at the base of Half Dome and other backcountry walls is allowed but only with a valid Wilderness Permit.

For details about permits and low-impact guidelines, stop by the Wilderness Center for a brochure, visit www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/wildpermits.htm or call 209/372-0740.

Human Waste aka "Big Wall Exit Strategies"

Climbers should be proud to have innovated the Big Wall "poop-tube" method of dealing with human waste. Long before the NPS required us to do so, climbers realized that the old brown bomber, bag-it-and-toss-it system was both disgusting and a health and safety concern. Here are a couple of tips for the right way to relieve yourself in vertical wilderness:

- Go to the bathroom in a paper bag or in a prefabricated human waste disposal bag like a Wagbag and then put that bag into a container to carry up the route. Ordinary plastic bags are not a good option and should only be used in an emergency.

- Carry your container down with you and discard paper bags into a pit toilet like those at the base of the East Ledges descent from El Capitan. Wagbags can be disposed of in bear-resistant dumpsters. Please do not drop plastic bags into pit toilets because they clog the pumps used to empty the toilets.

Every year we remove poop tubes abandoned on routes or at the summit, bags of poo dropped to the base, and turds left in cracks (Camp VI on The Nose being especially gruesome). Packing out your human waste from the summits and bases of walls should become the accepted norm in the future. The solutions are there, so this pollution is completely avoidable!

Climber-generated refuse on Camp 6, The Nose.
Photo NPS



Abandoned/Unattended Property

Property left unattended for longer than 24 hours can be impounded. If it is impractical to return within 24 hours, leave ropes and equipment in place only as long as you are actively using them. Leaving your stash of gear, ropes, and supplies on top of El Cap for your personal convenience and storage year after year is selfish and not acceptable. Imagine what it would look like if every climber did the same, or if hikers were allowed to cache gear all over the park! Label and date equipment, ropes, and water bottles with your contact information if you have a reasonable plan to return to unattended equipment to avoid removal.

Fixed Ropes

Ropes fixed on walls are treated the same way as other unattended property. If you fix ropes, only do so immediately before beginning your ascent, and remove them once committed to the route. If you plan to return to a project regularly, leave your ropes in place only when you are actively working the route. Do not leave ropes or gear on popular routes—this takes away from the experience of other climbers, and can potentially create unsafe conditions. Once again, the “alpine” style was initiated by Valley climbers—check out the history of the Muir Wall or the South Face of Mt. Watkins later in this book.

The “established” fixed ropes below Heart Ledges, East Ledges, and on the Slabs approach to Half Dome are not maintained or condoned by the NPS. Do not expect these ropes to be in place, and be prepared to climb or descend without them.

The recent popularity of big wall free-climbing has added thousands of feet of fixed rope to long routes. Free climbers often rappel in to work their routes, leaving the ropes in place for easy access. By the fall of 2010, after a busy climbing season, all but a few pitches of Salathé Wall/Freerider had been fixed by free climbers and most of the lines were still abandoned in place as winter approached. This behavior could ultimately lead to more restrictions. It’s amazing that there are now so many climbers able to free the Grade VIs, but consider waiting until you’re strong enough to attempt them

ground up or at least remove the lines when you are not using them.

Clean Climbing

Please respect “clean climbing” ethics on all routes, long and short. Avoid nailing whenever possible and don’t drill new holes for hook placements or chisel head placements. Never fabricate holds or change the nature of established climbs.

Bolting and New Routes

Hand drilling protection or anchor bolts is OK but motorized power drills are prohibited. When you place a new bolt, keep in mind that you are permanently altering the rock. If planning a new wall route, take the time to talk to the local Yosemite climbing community and become familiar with the history of the area. Is your line really going to be that good? How much “gardening” will you have to do? (Intentionally removing plant life is prohibited regardless of where you are in Yosemite.) Will anyone else ever climb it? New routes have a profound impact on the environment around the route through permanent bolts, vegetation loss, erosion at the base, and disturbing animal habitat. The new route and bolting policies in Yosemite are very liberal, especially considering that most routes are in designated Wilderness. The Wilderness Act states that there should be no permanent installations, and disregard for the spirit of the law could cause the policy to change. There are hundreds of established wall routes in Yosemite—is your first ascent really worth the impacts?

Camp 4 getting “Facelifted” on The Nose, 2010. Photo courtesy NPS



Food Storage

Do not leave any food, drinks, toiletries, or trash at the base of the wall—bears deliberately seek food there because of climber trash and food caches. While preparing for a wall you must store food and all scented items in bear-resistant canisters or hang it at least 50 feet off the ground on 5.10 or harder climbing. Think that's overkill? I've seen bears climb 5.10 slab below Mescalito, 5.9 crack 50 feet up the first pitch of the Regular North West Face of Half Dome, and paw up 5.6 hand jams two pitches up After Six. They weren't climbing for fun or adventure—they were risking their lives for Clif Bars and King Cobras. In short, if you can reach your food without climbing gear (even free-soloing), it is not stored correctly.

Remember to remove all food, scented items, and even empty wrappers from your car. Bears are attracted to a mess—wrappers, beer cans, and general disarray may provoke a bear to break in to your vehicle to investigate. Bear-proof lockers are available at El Capitan Bridge, at the Zodiac parking area (Devil's Elbow), The Ahwahnee Hotel, and Bridalveil Fall, etc. (See map.) Please do not place a lock on these shared lockers.



Peregrine Falcon. Photo courtesy NPS

Peregrine Falcons

During the FA of Sea of Dreams in 1978, Jim Bridwell, Dave Diegelman, and Dale Bard discovered a nesting pair of Peregrine Falcons—the first confirmed nest in the Park in 36 years and the beginning of a remarkable recovery by this bird. Climbers have helped wildlife biologists consistently since then to ensure the species survives.

In 2009, 12 pairs were monitored in Yosemite, and they fledged 21 young. In 2010, for the first time since 1994, Peregrines nested on El Capitan; the nest site (aerie), on the North America Wall, was last occupied in 1986.

To maximize reproductive success, the NPS may close areas to climbing during the nesting season, typically March 1st through August 1st. In 2010 the El Capitan closure included all routes between and including “South Seas/Pacific Ocean Wall,” “North America Wall,” east to “Native Son”. Routes four pitches or fewer, at the base of the Southeast Face, remained open. Climbers can expect similar closures wherever Peregrines choose to nest in future years.

Take Care of the Places You Love

Most of you reading this probably already follow these low-impact climbing principles, and we thank you for leaving no trace. But you've probably seen junk on The Nose, at the base of the Regular North West Face, or at the summit of El Cap. Please help the park by educating your friends, by picking up trash, and by volunteering in community functions like the Yosemite Facelift (yosemiteclimbing.org). Unfortunately, the “easy” or entry-level routes are the most

abused. This is what the uninitiated climber sees first, and hopefully he or she doesn't take this poor example as the norm. In 1976 Chris Jones wrote in *Climbing in North America*, “Whatever reason the unsuccessful climbers gave, and they ranged from equipment failure to vitamin overdoses, the crux of the matter was people were still scared of big walls.” This is still true today, and if you are scared and struggling on a big wall the last thing you care about is your environmental impact. Please be patient—gain the skill to climb safely and with low impacts. It's not just getting to the top that matters, it's the trail you leave behind.

**Regulations may change and the park user is expected to be up to date. For the latest information check nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/climbing, supertopo.com/climbing/forum.php the Camp 4 kiosk, any Wilderness Center or the Mountain Shop.*

What is YOSAR?

By Butch Farabee

YOSAR is an acronym—Yosemite Search And Rescue, the park’s highly respected, nationally recognized emergency response unit. (YOSAR is an unofficial team name.) It was coined in the fall of 1972 by then SAR Officer Pete Thompson. It was somewhat an after thought, born of an ugly incident.

Just after midnight on August 1, 1972, a teenage recently-fired-but-still-want-to-be-park employee set the government’s barn afire. After torching the stacked hay, his intent was to rush in and rescue the horses, become a hero, and be welcomed back as an NPS employee. It backfired—no pun intended—and seventeen horses and mules died a horrible death. Additionally, another seven nearby buildings were destroyed. (Total of approximately 20,000 square feet.) Several of these buildings were among the oldest historic structures still standing in the Valley: these included two that had been built during the Civilian Conservation Corps-era and a couple built far earlier yet by the U. S. Cavalry, when they guarded Yosemite.

The barn was at the same spot the current (2010) facility is and the other buildings were near where the present (2010) SAR cache is. This fire, had it been in a large city setting, was significant enough to be a Three-Alarm Fire.

The young man had in fact, recently been employed earlier that summer on a park trail crew led by retired NPS Historian and former

Trail Crew Supervisor, Jim Snyder. They were deployed near Merced Lake. He suffered a bee sting and went into anaphylactic shock and urgently needed to be flown out from the nearby Ranger Station. Much to his chagrin, his age was discovered and he was separated from his laborer position.

This disaster, in addition to the barn and animals, also consumed virtually all of the

Valley’s mountain rescue equipment. Just as today, it was then the largest SAR cache in the entire National Park System and one of the largest rural caches in the country. The NPS Regional Office quickly gave Thompson essentially a blank check to replace ropes, hardware, sleeping bags, clothing, dry food, stoves, rain gear, tents, etc. Items like ‘biners, specially ordered in orange, arrived by the box load and the park’s procurement staff insisted Pete needed to keep these highly coveted items from wandering off, ending up in someone’s haulbag. So, Pete quickly coined YOSAR, which was soon stamped or stenciled onto anything and

everything that would take the five letters.

In the mid-1980s, Joshua Tree National Monument adopted the term JOSAR for its SAR team, and down through the years other parks have made use of this, as well. So, what began as a simple but efficient way to identify equipment, has evolved into a term synonymous with professionalism and cutting-edge search and rescue.



Jim "The Bird" Bridwell, de-facto head and king of YOSAR performing a rescue on El Cap in the 1970s. Photo Courtesy of NPS

Ethics

Taking Care of The Big Stone

By Steve Grossman

Big wall climbing has never been more popular. There is a report that 90 individual headlamps were tallied one summer night on the Captain in 1999. With our numbers growing rapidly and traffic on some long routes becoming intense, the need is glaring to adopt a low impact wall ethic. Each party's experience on a climb can be strongly affected by thoughtless actions of previous ascents, be it trash, human waste, pin scars, or fixed gear left on the wall.

Route preservation warrants attention on two levels: the preservation of the environment and the level of challenge. Environmental preservation includes obvious things such as packing out trash and feces. It needs to extend to dealing with urine and junked climbing hardware. Yosemite's modest summer rainfall and high climber traffic mean that some routes stink of piss all season long. Piss bottles should be used. Climbers should also consider leaving extra space and containers in their "poop tubes" to remove trash left by others. Take the time to remove old webbing, junked copperheads and any other worthless fixed gear that you encounter.

Preserving climbing's challenge requires using placements with the least possible impact. Today's extensive array of climbing tools has made hammered placements increasingly unnecessary. Many of the climbs in this book have been done cleanly. They will maintain their level of difficulty indefinitely if climbers substitute ingenuity for force. Clean aid climbing requires diligence and practice, but

there is a payoff: the deep reward of having taken nothing away from a route but the grin on your face.

It is worth noting that although the terms "clean" and "hammerless" are used interchangeably in the rest of this book, here, a hammerless ascent means no hammer is carried, which is the height of commitment. As Bruce Carson wrote after the first clean and hammerless ascent of The Nose with Yvon Chouinard in 1974, "By leaving the hammer at home, the nut aficionado can regain the uncertainty and adventure of the first ascensionists." My own hammerless, 25th anniversary ascent of the Muir Wall was one of the most adventurous climbs in my experience because the outcome was in doubt to the last pitch!

Once a hammer enters the picture the outcome becomes much more predictable and the challenge is to use the least destructive option. Tip-stacked and over-driven pitons top the impact list with copperheads close behind. Mastery of aid climbing requires confidence in your testing procedures. Learn to avoid the extra couple of blows that exceed security and lead to more wear. Don't use the pick on your hammer to drive copperheads; missed blows mean instant flaring and beat placements. Carry the necessary tools for properly placing and cleaning heads. Try to use placements that will not become fixed and will lower the challenge for the next party.

Lines of fixed copperheads and unnecessary drilling degrade the character of a route. Reach inside yourself for the commitment to push your limits and leave minimal impact. Take pride in our heritage as climbers; make ingenuity and skill take precedence over expediency and force so that the challenge and adventure of big wall climbing will not become lost. Little that I have said is new. Hugh Burton in his 1975 "El Cap Update" proclaimed, "Our cliffs are an unrenewable resource. I know it's been said before, but it's got to be said again and remembered if the climbs are to remain as they are: incredible!"

Ammon McNeely and Ivo Ninov on their way to making the first one day ascent of Native Son (VI 5.9 A4).
Photo John Dickey