

THE INCREDIBLE HULK

Hitting the jackpot in the High Sierra, California

PETER CROFT



Venturi Effect, Pitch 4, The Book of Secrets: weird incut dykes and a crack that would suddenly appear and then vanish just as quickly. *Dave Nettle*

At three in the morning I couldn't stand it anymore. Although we had set the alarm for five, I was just too wound up. Catnapping through the night, every hour or so I had checked the glowing face of my watch and then, turning slightly, looked up through my tent door at the hulking black silhouette of a wall that blocked out half the stars.

Without a moon, all the secrets of the wall lay hidden. The pitches we had climbed so far on earlier efforts I saw now in my mind's eye. A couple of them, steep blank corners of bewildering bridging, were easily the hardest free climbing yet done in the High Sierra. One of them, in particular, smacked me down completely on my first attempts. Just two days earlier I had managed to lead that pitch, arriving at the belay mystified, unable to remember any of the crux moves. Above our high point lurked a series of unknowns, and in the dark I imagined the best and the worst.

The Incredible Hulk, its summit a bit higher than 11,000 feet, lies just north of Yosemite National Park. Invisible from roads or other climbing areas, it sits at the head of a steep, trackless canyon. West facing and 1,500 feet high, the main wall has a big, cold feeling to it at first light, colder yet if the usual Hulk wind is blowing. Those strong winds are a double-edged sword, for although they can make an ascent a race to stay warm—or a nightmare to retreat from—they also scour the stone, with the result that the rock is the best I've seen in the range.

My first trips here were simply to repeat the two big classics, Positive Vibrations and the Red Dihedral. From those routes I glimpsed a number of unclimbed crack systems, a couple of them running the height of the wall. Awed by the place, I assumed that if they hadn't been done they must be hopeless to free climb. I don't know what I was thinking.

Intent on coffee, I wiggled out of my sleeping bag and tiptoed past Dave Nettle and Greg Epperson lying sound asleep in their respective bivy tents, immune, apparently, to the buzzing tension I felt. Dave, who had been with me on the first foray onto this route, had made scores of first ascents up and down the range and so, perhaps, could afford to be nonchalantly asleep. Greg, the master climbing photographer, had loads of big-wall experience, but on this trip photography would be his main focus, so he, too, could slumber on. I, on the other hand, was facing my first big new route in the High Sierra and any further attempt at sleep was useless. Over the past ten years I had combed the range for big traverses, climbing new ground here and there as I linked peaks together, but had never tried my hand at a first ascent up any of the big walls.

Our route followed the massive dihedrals just left of Positive Vibes, a line, I've since learned, that a number of people had been eyeing. Dave himself had had a stab at it some years before but had been stopped by steep, blank ground. Because of his work schedule it had now been several weeks since we had gone up to explore those corners. Back in early June of 2004 he and I climbed seven pitches, with Dave putting out a beast of an effort aiding up the crackless sixth and seventh pitches to place protection bolts. A week later Kevin Calder, a friend from Bishop, helped me find a more direct start to the route, following some unlikely but beautiful 5.11 cracks. Finally, just the day before yesterday Greg and I had climbed those seven pitches again to fix ropes for his photographic efforts. Although this time I managed to free climb to there, my optimism was tempered by the uncertainty above and the threat of thunderstorms that been pounding the mountains.

Behind our tents a large boulder formed a cave for our kitchen, and I hunkered down in the back of it with the warm glow of the stove and the smell of good coffee. Soon I heard the others stirring and I put another pot on. The day could begin.

We left camp in half light, hiked up steep talus, and began climbing 20 minutes later. Greg, loaded down with camera gear, became the juggling machine sprinting for position while

Dave and I swung leads up the first five pitches. After the initial lead of 5.10 the route stiffened up into 5.11 for a few hundred feet before steepening as we climbed out a large overhang to gain the main corner.

At the small ledge at the base of the sixth pitch I got ready for the first hard climbing. Wall exposure sunk in as I placed a small TCU and made the first wide stem. Here the rock reared up steeper at the same time as the left wall of the dihedral turned to glass. Bolts protected the rest of the pitch and it was a good thing, too. The back of the corner was truly blank; I doubted a rarp could punch its way in. Luckily, the right wall had a smattering of small edges, and I crimped on those when I could while bridging out on the polish to my left.

Once I'm way up off the ground, wide stemming is my favorite type of climbing. The climbing becomes increasingly multi-dimensional with arms and legs spanned wide across the two facets. Looking down in the middle of a hard move and seeing nothing but thin air, you become fully conscious of where you are.

Pulling up onto a small belay ledge, I was only too aware that the pressure was on. The pitch I had just done was full value 5.12, and the one above was a number grade harder than that. Even though I had climbed these pitches before, I had no recollection of the crux moves ahead, other than that they were maddeningly complex and delicate. Over my left shoulder thunderclouds were already building; with at least a half dozen pitches to go I felt there was simply no time for falling and flailing.

Without any preliminaries, the crux began with wide, wide bridging, at once both delicate and powerful. Often I was forced to make three or four intricate moves in order to position myself for one move up. Halfway up, the pitch eased off to 5.12, but the sustained climbing and tiny holds kept the intensity level amped up until the very end.

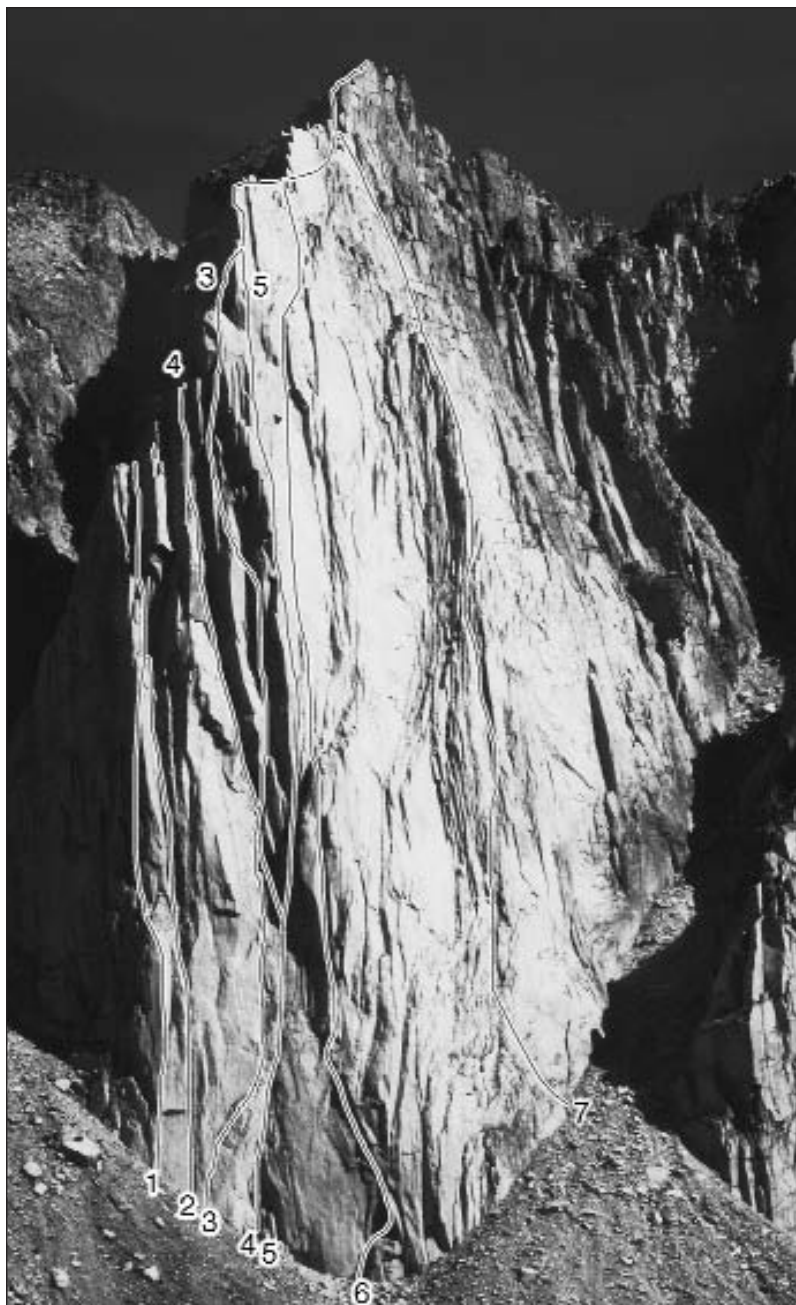
At the belay I shook my head in disbelief. I could remember none of the crux moves; my mind seemed more pumped than my forearms. Dave speedily arrived and slapped me on the back, grinning. Through the last two pitches he had French-freed the majority, yarding on quick draws and standing in slings. Now, though, he was eager to try the next pitch, another dihedral. Although this one started out blank, 30 feet up a finger crack appeared on the left wall.

We could see that black lichen and some loose flakes lined the crack above, so I aid climbed up to clean it. Mindful of the darkening clouds, I went as fast as I could, leapfrogging brass nuts and TCUs to near the top and then lowering and doing my best to prepare the pitch for Dave.

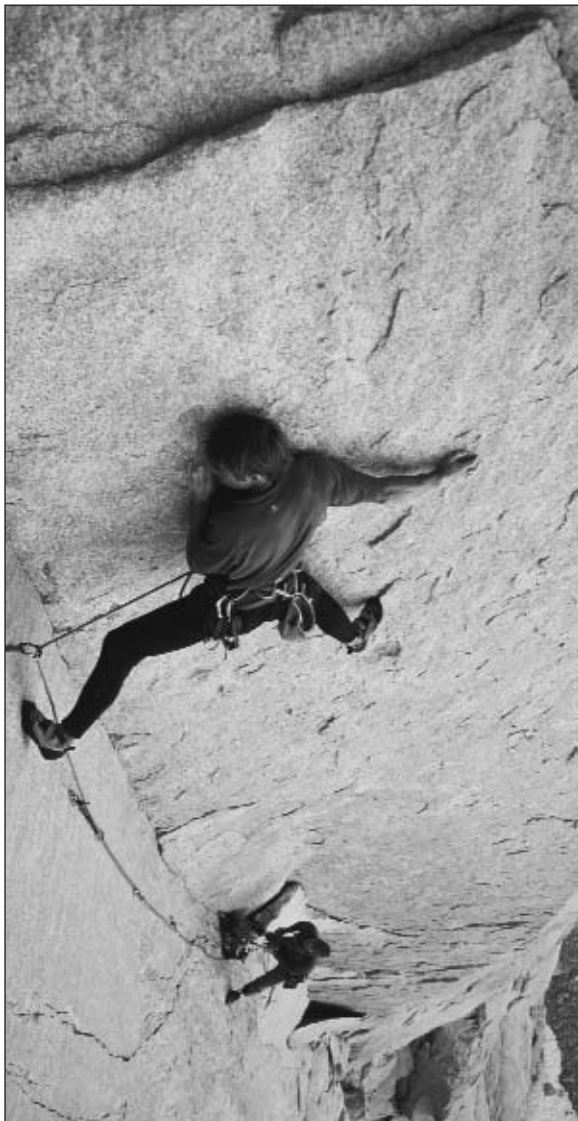
By the time we switched ends of the rope Dave was ready. My best guess about the pitch was that it would be something like 5.11+, if we were lucky. Dave likes to give the impression that his upper limit is 5.10+ which I know is bull but there was still no doubt he would be stretched. What followed was one of the best efforts I've seen in years. Insecure bridging, fingertip liebacking and horizontal full-body stems took him up into the finger crack. Gasping, he managed another 20 feet before pitching off.

After Dave lowered and cleaned the gear it was my turn. Still fooled by his modesty, I under-estimated the difficulty. In no time at all I was fighting for every inch, wrangling in gear and sucking thin air. I had hoped that once I reached the finger crack I'd be in there, but as soon as I did it angled away from the corner making the corner impossible to stem off of. There was little I could do but smear my feet on polished granite and crank on the thin jams.

As I climbed up onto a good ledge, I felt cooked. Belaying Dave with my heavy arms, I had new respect for his effort. The pitch had been much harder than I had guessed, probably



The west face of the Incredible Hulk, 1,500 feet tall, whose summit lies at just over 11,000 feet. The cliff is actually much wider than it appears in this photo. All known routes: (1) Blowhard (IV 5.12+); (2) Polish Route; (3) Airstream (V 5.13); (4) Sunspot (V 5.11); (5) Positive Vibrations (V 5.11); (6) Venturi Effect (V 5.12+); (7) Red Dihedral (IV 5.10). Route information supplied by Peter Croft. *Dave Nettle*



The sixth pitch of Airstream (5.12+)—little edges on the right wall, blank glass on the left. *Dave Nettle*

what we had done. For Dave, another big new route, one that he had been dreaming about for years. Free climbing as much as he could, he had surpassed himself. Greg had photography as his main objective, alternately jumaring and climbing as was practical. The confident grin he sported on top confirmed that he had "got it." For me it was a summit of summits. This was the hardest big free climb that I had ever done and my first in the High Sierra. At that point I was quite sure that I was done with the Hulk. I had no idea.

5.12+ or so. His underestimation of his abilities was laughable, for he had climbed deep into the difficulties.

Greg arrived at the ledge and helped haul the pack. His cheerful strength and efficiency on this wall helped make this one of the smoothest running and most enjoyable big climbs I've ever done.

The three of us gazed up at the route. The cracks got fatter now—finger and hand, fist and off-width. Dave led two pitches from there to the ridgecrest. One of them was brilliant, involving a wild overhanging face traverse from a hand crack to an arching corner. Pulling out of an overhanging off-width into the sun, he quickly ran the rope out to the ridge.

We climbed up and into the top of Positive Vibes, where beautiful sunlit finger and hand cracks took us to easy ground. Here it appeared that the thunderheads realized we would summit and decided to give up. The dark clouds turned lighter and the blue soon outweighed the gray. Several hundred feet of mid-fifth took us to a final steep corner and soon we were on top.

Sitting on the summit, the three of us took it all in. With the storm threat gone we were able to laugh at the earlier intensity. Now, we allowed ourselves to bask in

In the days that followed, my thoughts kept returning to the Hulk, not so much to the route we had just done, which we named Airstream, but to the crack systems on either side. Back home in Bishop I came to realize that I cared nothing about Tuolumne and the Valley and next to nothing about the rest of the Sierra. I became obsessed; I knew it and reveled in it.

Before long I was back, this time with Scott Carson out of Salt Lake City. Jimmy Dean is what some call him, out of their reverential awe upon viewing his bratwurst-sized fingers. On the first day Scott and I went up to investigate the cracks right of Positive Vibes. Starting on that route, we climbed several hundred feet to a large ledge from which we could view a beautiful left-facing dihedral that was an integral part of our proposed route. Right away I saw that it was too thin; free-climbable perhaps but at an absurd grade. I wanted no part of some pitch I would have to work on for days. So we decided to continue up Positive Vibes, a worthy goal since Scott hadn't climbed the Hulk yet.

Two pitches higher I had a hunch. I got Scott to lower me out around the arête to view that stunning corner. The farther down I went, the higher my hopes became. A hidden crack came into view, as well as some horizontal dikes. Satisfied that it would go, I yelled up to stop lowering. Elated, I grappled my way back up, taking as much tension as Scott could give me to regain the belay. From there we decided to follow PV to the top and return the next day. Under warm, sunny skies we flew up the pitches, and Scott got his first view of Hulk perfection.

The next day we re-ascended the first five pitches of PV to the Bivy Ledge, a large slanting shelf some 600 feet up. From there we did a series of rappels down the new corner system to do some cleaning, in particular some big loose blocks up high and some munge down low.

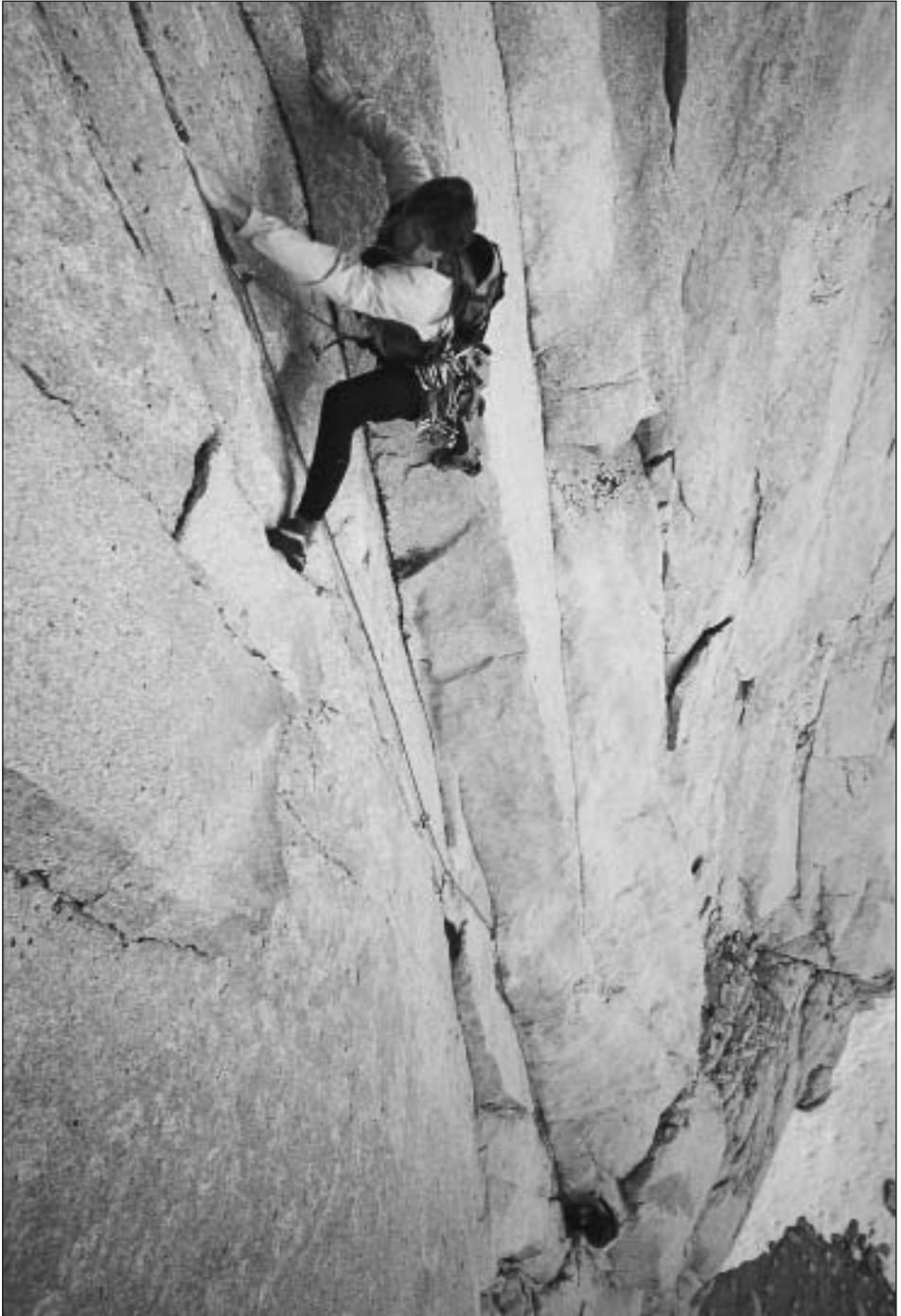
By noon we were back down on the ledge at the top of the second pitch of PV and ready to give it a go. The first pitch involved an unlikely-looking traverse to a flaring crack. Hanging on with my left hand, I whacked a knifeblade up to the hilt. A couple of blind, fingery moves led around the corner into the crack where a long reach between flaring jams provided the crux. This plunked me down at the base of a tan-colored corner I had eyed the day before. Scott joined me at the semi-hanging belay and I re-racked, leaning heavily on brass nuts and tiny TCUs.

The next hundred feet provided us with perhaps the best bridging corner I've ever done. The main crack varied between 1/8 and 1/4 inches, but every 25 feet or so a splitter finger-hand crack swept out of the bed of the corner and out onto the left wall. Wild stemming took me by the thin sections until I could get a rest when I gained the splitter. Even with the periodic reprieves that the finger and hand jams provided, it was still one of the hardest bridging pitches I have done, and I barely made it to the belay without falling. I called this pitch the Book of Secrets because of its many unusual and surprising features.

Scott came up, raving about the quality, and we climbed a steep, thuggy lieback to the Bivy Ledge. We rapped off from there, thrilled at the quality of the climbing. Although what we had done amounted only to a three-pitch variation, I felt the doors swing open, not just to the possibility of a fully independent line but also to other prospects I had scoped. It seemed that on this cliff every time I reached an impasse a hold appeared or a crack opened up.

I felt as though my friends and I were playing a lottery with a huge jackpot and that we had winning tickets—and no one else was even bothering to play. I was the luckiest, though, because, while my friends were sporadically psyched, I was full time obsessed.

Dave was certainly the hungriest of my friends, with a great ability to think big. He and I had spoken about the possibilities of a free line right of PV, in particular the upper headwall cracks on the Macedonian Route, an old aid line from the seventies. Dave had had a go years



The third pitch of Airstream. Desperate looking, but full of hidden surprises (5.11). *Dave Nettle*

before but was turned back by ever-thinning finger cracks. Now, with the guts of an independent start in place, Dave and I decided to investigate that upper headwall.

Returning to the Bivy Ledge, he and I set out on the headwall, free climbing at first and then resorting to aid as the cracks pinched down and the angle steepened. We spent all day pulling on biners and standing in slings, cleaning off flakiness and loose blocks, including a massive guillotine flake that narrowly missed me when I pulled on it. Here and there we placed bolts, either for belays or for protection, but it was a small amount compared with the long blank sections we had had to deal with on Airstream. Although we didn't try to free the pitches, it was clear to me that the route would go. Bubbling with tentative enthusiasm, we reached a point a couple of hundred feet from the ridgecrest and rapped the 1,200 feet to the ground. We called this line the Venturi Effect out of deference to the windy nature of the place and because of the funnel-like finish to the headwall. Hiking out that evening, I grinned knowing that the pieces of the puzzle were there. I couldn't wait to get back and I didn't. The next few weeks were spent either going to the Hulk or planning to go there. Phoning friends in town, and then friends outside of town, I left stalker messages on a score of answering machines. Eventually one would pay off and I'd head back in.

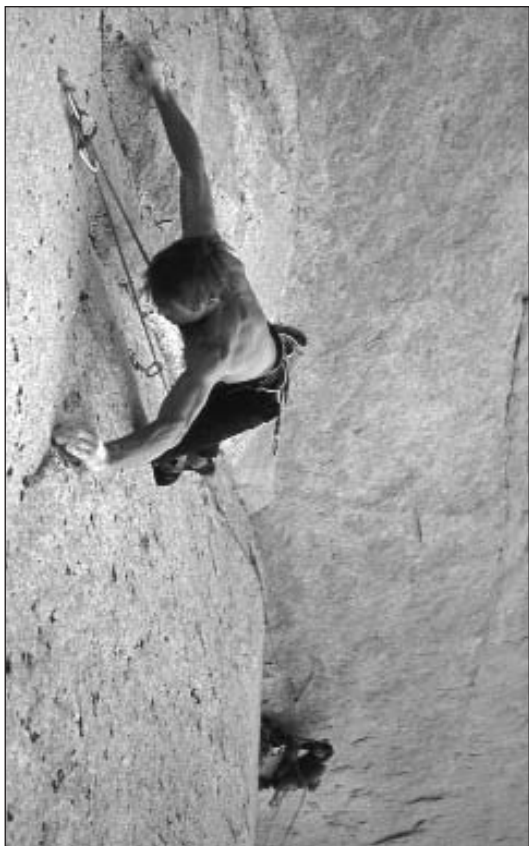
My longtime friend Andrew Stevens stepped into the picture at this point and, with Dave's blessing, we went up to free the headwall. Beneath threatening skies we did just that, bullied by booming thunder and afternoon showers. Under the gun, flashing pitches became more than a game; it became critical strategy. As it was, we barely made it to the top of the headwall before weather dictated a retreat.

Andrew and I also made a stab at a line on the shady north face but retreated when we ran into crappy rock. We then shifted our attention to the prow at the far left side of the west face, an unlikely-looking line consisting of thin cracks and short blank sections. Unlike other Hulk routes, which tend to start off at a relatively low angle, this one began steep right out of the gate.

Starting on the nearby Polish Route, we angled up a few hundred feet and left to a ledge on the prow. After placing a few bolts, we climbed an incredible pitch face climbing up into a thin finger crack just left of the crest. The crux involved first knuckle finger jams while slapping up and heelhooking the bald arête. Toward the top of the pitch I ran out of the right-sized gear and had to face that heart-fluttering choice of going for it or jumping off. Too scared to jump and too pumped to hold on, I lunged for a jug and stuck it. Immediately I saw that no gear would go in, so I palmed the arête as high as I could--it was crap. I edged higher and clamped down, front-pointed on nothing footholds, and quickly stood up on the jug. Hyperventilating, I looked down at the exposure and at the fall I would have taken. I quickly laced up the crack in front of me.

The next pitch took a blind step around to the right side of the arête, where a perfect handcrack shot up for a long pitch to a ledge on the Polish Route. We followed this for a last long lead to the top. We called this route Blowhard.

More trips followed. Chris McNamara and I climbed the Venturi Effect to 3/4 height. Hans Steingartner and I did a direct start to Blowhard. I simply couldn't stay away. Somewhere in there, though, I injured my left elbow, and by early September, when Dave and I were ready to push to the top of Venturi, I knew I had to take a break. It was a heartbreaking decision to make and so I didn't make it.



The 5.13 third pitch of Airstream. Mind frazzlingly technical, toe numbingly footsy. *Dave Nettle*

finger crack just below the ninth and final crux pitch. By now I was taking a mental note at the end of every pitch of how much farther we had to go, a sure sign that I was getting tired. The next lead involved three 5.12 cruxes with a heartbreaker move right at the end. I had one chance to get it right.

At the last crux I felt fried. The contorted efforts I had made in order to favor my elbow were now making themselves felt. Liebacking off rounded seams and stemming as wide as I could, I committed to the final moves to the belay. In the midst of it a foot skidded and both hands slipped. Teeth gritted, I held on and barely, barely made it. One more 11+ liebacking pitch took us through the Venturi to the top of the headwall.

Sitting on a wild belay perch and belaying Dave, I watched the sun get low in the sky. It was a clear metaphor for the end of the Hulk season, which was okay by me. We raced up the last four easier pitches, tagged the top and ripped down the descent. Hiking in the dark those last few miles was one of those descents I wished would never end.

I'd like to say that the plums are now picked, but I'd never get away with such a baldfaced lie. I can, however, take some solace in the fact that all the factors that have guarded the Sierra from

Dave and I alpine started in on September 4. One way or another, this would be my last trip of the season to the Hulk. Either my elbow would cooperate and we'd make it or it wouldn't and I'd have to slink out with my tail between my legs, with a stack of "what ifs" to stew on over the winter.

If we were going to roll the dice, we at least wanted the stakes to be high, so we opted for a car-to-car ascent. Shorter days and the burly approach ensured that if it worked this would be the full package.

We started at the lowest point of the face, at the right side of a triangular slab. Dave led an initial awkward 5.11 pitch and I followed, babying my elbow as much as I could. I found I was able to hold on with my left arm but that cranking on it was tricky. Throughout the day this forced me into making bizarre sequences that allowed me to give the lion's share of the work to my right arm.

The landmarks of the route rolled by: the Book of Secrets, the Bivy Ledge, and then the headwall. The sun hit us halfway up this on a long 5.12

overdevelopment are still in place. Strenuous approaches, thunderstorms, and thin air are just some of the defenses that make highcountry climbing what it is. But the host of variables that make alpine rock climbing distasteful to some make it nirvana to others. Last summer at the Hulk was clearly one of those right-place-at-the-right-time situations. Grades in the High Sierra had slipped far behind other California climbing areas (somewhere in the 11+\12- range), leaving the range ripe for picking plums. To a certain extent, Yosemite experienced a similar situation in the mid-1980s. At that time a number of luminaries predicted that the Valley was dead, that the rock was simply too smooth to be conducive to hard free climbing. Many believed it and shifted their focus to other areas with more featured rock. Now it's plain to see that smooth-featured, impossible-looking granite is often climbable. In the High Sierra there are granite walls hiding throughout the 150-mile length of the range. What am I saying? I should shut my trap.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Northern Sierra Nevada, California

PEAK: Incredible Hulk, 11,300 feet, west face

ROUTES: Airstream (1,500 feet, V 5.13). Peter Croft, Greg Epperson, and Dave Nettle. July 3, 2004. Blowhard (800 feet, IV 5.12+). Peter Croft and Andrew Stevens. July 2004. Direct start: Peter Croft, Hans Steingartner. August 2004. Venturi Effect (1,500 feet, V 5.12+). Peter Croft and Dave Nettle. September 3, 2004.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Peter Croft is a Canadian living in Bishop, California, with his wife Karine. He works as a guide and have been climbing for about 25 years.