

North American Classic Route

Description



Wolf's Head, East Ridge

Grade III, 5.6

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This 10 pitch or so climb (or vertical hike) traverses the craggy, exposed east-west ridge of Wolf's Head, located just behind Pingora in the Cirque of the Towers, Wyoming. The climbing is essentially straightforward, but spectacular exposure and some rather attention-getting moves make it a classic. Though rated at 5.6, be prepared for moments of thin 5.7-ish climbing. We had the great good fortune to climb the route with someone who had done it previously. Without benefit of his experience, routefinding would have been a significant concern. For this reason we decided to write a brief description of the ascent, climb, and descent.

We did the climb on two 55m ropes, while the other team we were with used 60m ropes. This resulted in only one different pitch between our teams, the team with the longer rope joining the pitches described under #6 and #7 below, together. We used a fairly standard rack (stoppers, cams, 2 hexes and a set of tricams). Large pro would have been good at times, but probably is not worth lugging along. An additional note regarding pro on this climb: due to the traversing nature of many of the more difficult pitches, frequently the second is exposed to as much risk as the leader (for in-depth analysis of seconding, see interesting article in this month's Rock & Ice). Bear this in mind when assembling your climbing team.

Approach Gully (Ed. Note - this is the "alternate" approach in the guidebook, which starts at the east end of the approach slabs. An approach further west is shown and described in the guidebook).

Start from near the north end of Cirque Lake at the head of the trail that ends at the east end of Wolf's Head. Scramble 4th and 5th class rock all the way to the ridge of Wolf's Head with a few tricky moves and significant exposure. This can be done roped or unroped. Opting for the sporting unroped approach will save time, but should be considered carefully based on the experience and scrambling comfort level of the climbers.

From ridge, do 2 short rappels to arrive at the base of the ramp pitch. One rap can be done, but this requires some tricky down-climbing.

Roped pitches

Do 3-4 easy pitches up the ramp-like east ridge to gain the ridge top. The first pitch moves up the notorious 2-foot wide 30 degree slab for about 30 feet with no pro.

4-5. Do 2 or so more pitches of easy 5th class climbing along the ridge top.

The first traverse pitch passes from the south to north side of the ridge, near the east end of the ridge. Start by moving down along a small ledge, with a tricky move that requires bracing against a large boulder. Move delicately around the interior of overhung area to the left. At some point, you will look north and see a tight slot in the rock formed by a leaning slab. Go through this slot (very tight squeeze which can be avoided by crossing above, higher in the slot). Do not go up to the left as the climbing will be difficult. Belay just beyond the slot.

"Piton Pitch". This pitch involves delicate, exposed face climbing on the north side of Wolf's Head along a small crack, protectable only with fixed pitons (2). It is very short (40-50 feet) and exciting (scary). It can be combined with pitch #6 if you have 60m ropes. Belay on large ledge above.

(North side) Start up a large flake/crack with an easy layback and good pro. There are also good holds on the face. Once on ledge, walk back to where you see another crack system that you climb until you are even with a large horizontal crack on the rock face which you can step into. Use either hands or feet in this crack to do the traverse. The crux is to step out of the crack, around the corner—make sure to protect well for second. Once around corner, move up to the knife edge of the ridge for some spectacularly exposed climbing. Move down off of ridge edge to belay in a cave like overhang. At this point you will be adjacent to the "Darth Vader" pinnacle.

(South side to north side) From cave emerge around corner on ledge. Move to large horizontal crack. Traverse with feet or hands in crack. Using your feet is less strenuous, however, there are no hands for the length of the traverse, and any pro will be at your feet. At end of crack, sling small boulder and clip one rope only so that your second will be on top rope for the next part of the pitch. Now move down to the left to a small diagonal crack. Use hands in crack and feet on dark colored nubbins that protrude from the rock. Pro is difficult here—try a large tricam. Move to and ascend chimney (one difficult move, but protectable). After chimney, go through small aperture in rock (remove pack) and belay on north side ledge.

Finish with 2 straightforward pitches primarily staying to the north side of the ridge, basically continuing to the west to gain the summit. Finish at rap station at high point along ridge.

Descent

The essence of the descent is to move down and to the west, toward a large gully which you ascend to a saddle, then down the south side to Cirque Lake and back to the trail. There are many ways to do this, and rap slings abound. The following descent description can be used as a guide, but a myriad other routes exist.

Do first rappel off summit of climb. Keep rope to right of large crack in order to avoid getting it stuck. Stop at very large ledge.

Scramble up and to west (left). Look for more slings slightly below this point. Do a long rappel (double 60m) or 2, with an intermediate stop (double 50m).

Walk down to the left along the well-worn path about 400-500 yards. You will come to a large slab where you can no longer comfortably scramble. The slings are slightly above you and to your left at this point. Do a short rappel to where it appears you can once again comfortably walk to the west.

Continue traversing toward the gully, staying low, and look for rap slings near the edge of the gully. Rappel into the gully, then hike up to the saddle and down the other side to the trail.