

MOUNT WHITNEY

BY SP PARKER AND TODD VOGEL
OF

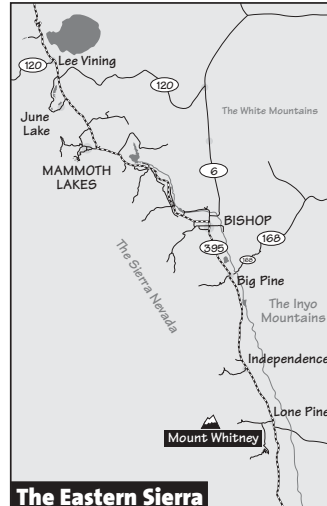




Mount Whitney and the portal from the Alabama Hills. *photo: Mick Ryan*

As the highest point in the lower forty eight states Mt. Whitney is a sought after summit with close to 25,000 people attempting to climb it annually. Most of these ascents are via the eleven mile circuitous "Trail Route" which winds it's way up the back side of the peak. The east side is however a different story. The approach is via an non-maintained trail that has developed over the years and climbs steeply gaining about 4600 feet in 4 miles. The east face is steep and for the alpinist offers the best way to one of the countries most popular summit. As John Muir said in 1873 after ascending the Mountaineers Route that this was the route for climbers; the Trail was for "soft succulent people."

Three routes up this east face are described here: Muir's Mountaineers Route, a third class scramble and two of the most popular technical climbs in the Sierra, Mount Whitney's East Face 5.7 and East Buttress 5.7



WHERE

Mt. Whitney is located above the town of Lone Pine on Highway 395 sixty miles south of Bishop. The peak is visible from town, but it is not the prominent peak one would expect and is overshadowed by the bulk of Lone Pine Peak, a mere 12,944er. Whitney is a relatively unpreposing peak further back and appears as the high point of a jagged ridge.

WHEN

Although high elevation, the eastern aspect of the peak and the south facing slopes of the approach tend to allow early season climbing. Ascents in May will probably have some snow on the approach and descent, by June there will only be odd patches and July should see completely snowless climbing. September often brings the winters first snowfall, but if the weather returns to good conditions the route will become snowfree and dry within one or two days although the snow will linger in the shaded descent gully.

STRATEGY

The crux is generally obtaining a permit to enter on the day you want since this is a popular trailhead. Once past this obstacle the route can be done in a day but you need to be fast and acclimatized to the

elevation. Three days makes for the best trip for most people with day one being the long steady grind to camp, day two for the ascent and day three for a casual return to the trailhead. For those weekend warriors an early ascent and competent climbing will allow time during summer's longer days to complete the climb and get back to Lone Pine in time for beer and pizza that evening and the long drive home. But be aware that Highway 395 has a reputation for numerous head on collisions from over tired recreationists!

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS

Overnight stays require a wilderness permit. The quota for this trail is 10; 6 of these can be reserved in advance and 4 are available the day of entry or the day prior. Those obtained on the on the entry day or before are free of charge; those obtained via advance reservation have a fee of \$5.00 (as of 2002) per person. Permits can be obtained from any Forest Service ranger station. If you decide to return down the Trail from the summit you will need yet another permit for entry via "Trailcrest" and the quota here is 25. The Trail is heavily patrolled by the Forest Service so expect to be asked for a permit by some snot nosed seasonal ranger.

(Mick to add stuff)

MOUNTAIN GUIDES

Us of course

APPROACH TO WHITNEY PORTAL AND CAMPING

Lone Pine has only one traffic light in town and this marks the turnoff from Highway 395. Turn west at this intersection on Whitney Portal Road. This heads through the Alabama Hills, the site of the filming of many westerns such as the Lone Ranger and home to great bouldering and short sport routes. Climb above the valley floor as the road switchbacks and catch a glimpse of the dry Lake bed of former Owens Lake drained of water by Los Angeles and now better referred to as Owens Dustbowl. The road ends at a small fishing pond and the Whitney Portal Store. Mileage?????

PARKING

This can be an issue on busy holidays and be prepared to park down alongside the road if all of the parking lots are full. Arriving early generally finds a parking spot within a few hundred yards of the trailhead.

BEARS

The big issue here is bears and Whitney bears rival national park bears in their destructive habits. Do not leave any food or scented items in your vehicle at all. The Forest Service has placed lockers in the main parking areas so use these and put all items in there. Empty out coolers and cover them with a cloth of pad since the bears will recognize the shape and investigate even if they are empty. Do not underestimate the potential for bear break-ins here and take care. Failure to do so will probably lead to a bear causing hundreds of dollars worth of damage and as well the Forest Service imposing a fine for improper food storage. All of this being said if you take proper precautions you should be able to avoid problems.

CAMPING

There is a large campground here but it fills up quickly. Advance reservations can be made by calling..?????.. or on the web at?????.... Some spots are available on a first come first served basis and there are hiker walk-in sites that rarely fill. The elevation here is about 8200 feet and is a good place to camp prior to the climb to aid acclimatization to the elevation. Alternatively.....???

FACILITIES

At the Trailhead there is a small store that offers last minute items and various souvenirs, tee shirts, hats etc. The also do great burgers and huge pancakes for breakfast that should power you up the trail; or weigh you down, unable to move. The store also runs a web site at...?????. that can give you trail conditions info and other local facts.

THE HUMAN WASTE FACTOR

The North Fork of Lone Pine Creek is one of the most heavily used climbers routes in the Sierra. The Forest Service has instituted a 'carry out' program form human waste. This is currently (2003) a voluntary program but we urge you to participate. The state of Iceberg Lake has improved a lot since the program was created and we hope that you will help to improve the situation. While not the most pleasant of things to do it is the best for the environment. Obtain bags from the Forest Service in Lone Pine or from the Whitney Portal Store. Lash the orange bag to the outside of your pack for the trip down and dump it in the receptacle at the trailhead and leave content that you have helped make the North Fork a better place for those who follow.

GEAR AND EQUIPMENT

This will depend upon how confident and competent you are so treat the following list is as a suggestion list rather than a definitive compendium.

Rope; A 150 footer is best since the terrain is broken enough that long leadouts will also lead to significant rope drag.

1 set wires stoppers. Nothing too small.

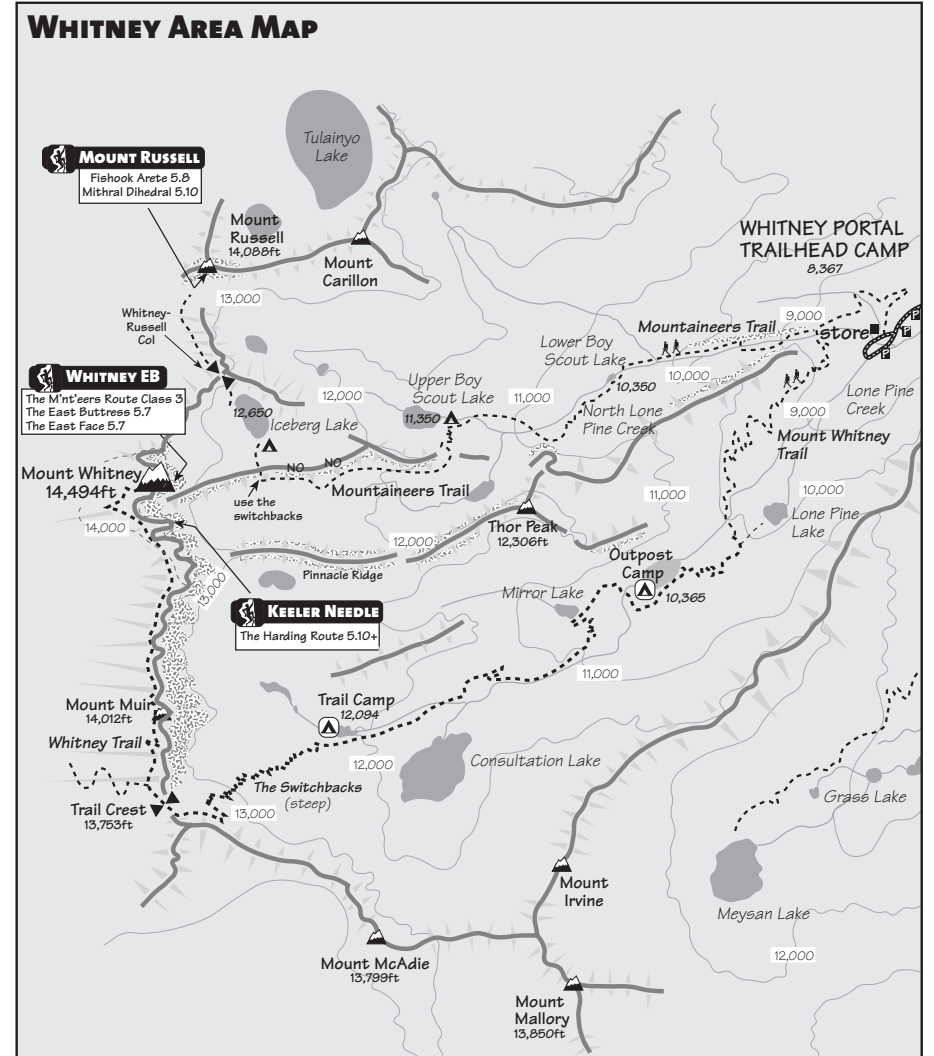
1 set Camalots 0.0 to 3.0

1 set Friends or similar 1.0 to 3.0

6 over the shoulder slings

15 Spare carabiners

Cordelettes for belay setups

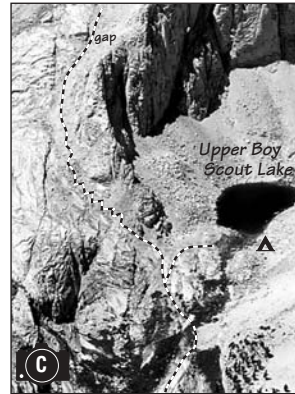
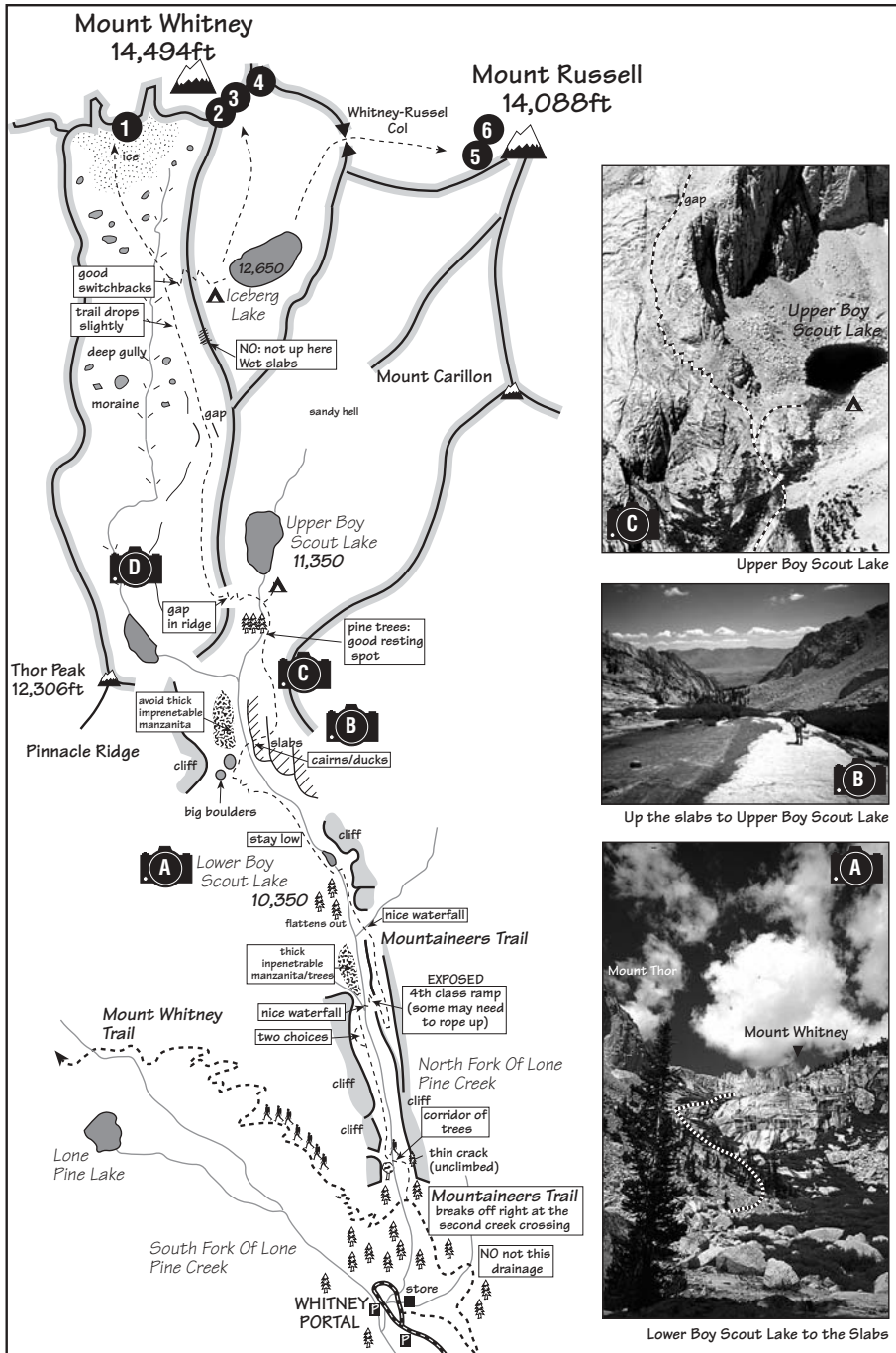


APPROACH FROM WHITNEY PORTAL TO THE ROUTES - THE MOUNTAINEERS TRAIL
 This approach has never had a maintained trail but has been taken by countless group over the years. Consequently use trails have developed all over the place. Some are better than others and the route described here is the "Guides Choice." Try to follow this and do what you can to avoid making new trails and furthering the degradation of this area.

Start off up the main trail which is a well maintained, broad and gently graded swath. The first stream crossing is that for Carillon Creek and this is not the way to go. So ignore the trail that has developed here, created by those who thought they knew the way and proceed to the second creek which is a little larger and about a 0.85 miles from the trailhead and at 8800 feet.

Do not cross the creek but pick up the trail on the north side and follow this up though the pine forest until it emerges onto an open slope with manzanita bushes. Ignore use trails that take the north side (right) of the creek and drop down into the willows and cross the creek. (9050 feet).

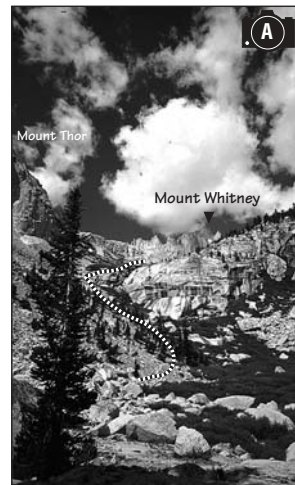
Take the "tunnel" through the willows and emerge into an area of bushes and talus. Follow up this for several hundred yards until the main trial turns left up a steeper hillside with a very eroded trail. This will take you to the bottom of the walls on the south side of the canyon. The trail now follows along these walls and drops slightly to the creek.



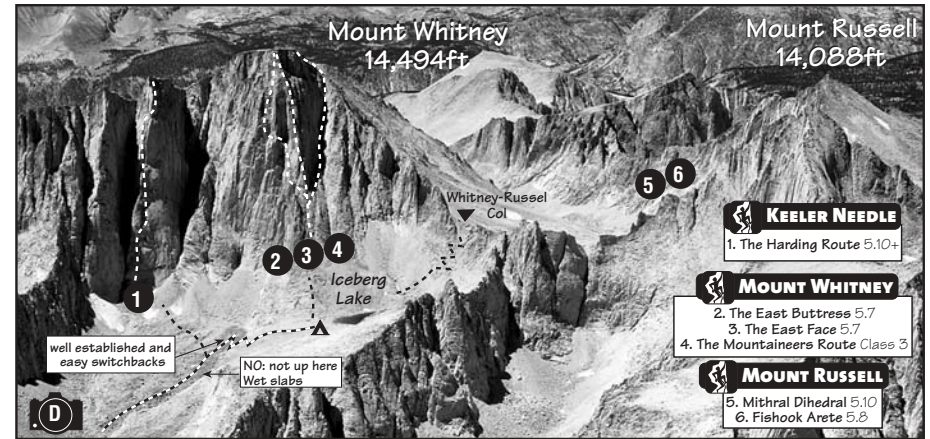
Upper Boy Scout Lake



Up the slabs to Upper Boy Scout Lake



Lower Boy Scout Lake to the Slabs



KEELER NEEDLE

1. The Harding Route 5.10+

MOUNT WHITNEY

2. The East Buttress 5.7
3. The East Face 5.7
4. The Mountaineers Route Class 3

MOUNT RUSSELL

5. Mithral Dihedral 5.10
6. Fishhook Arête 5.6

APPROACH FROM WHITNEY PORTAL TO THE ROUTES CONTINUED

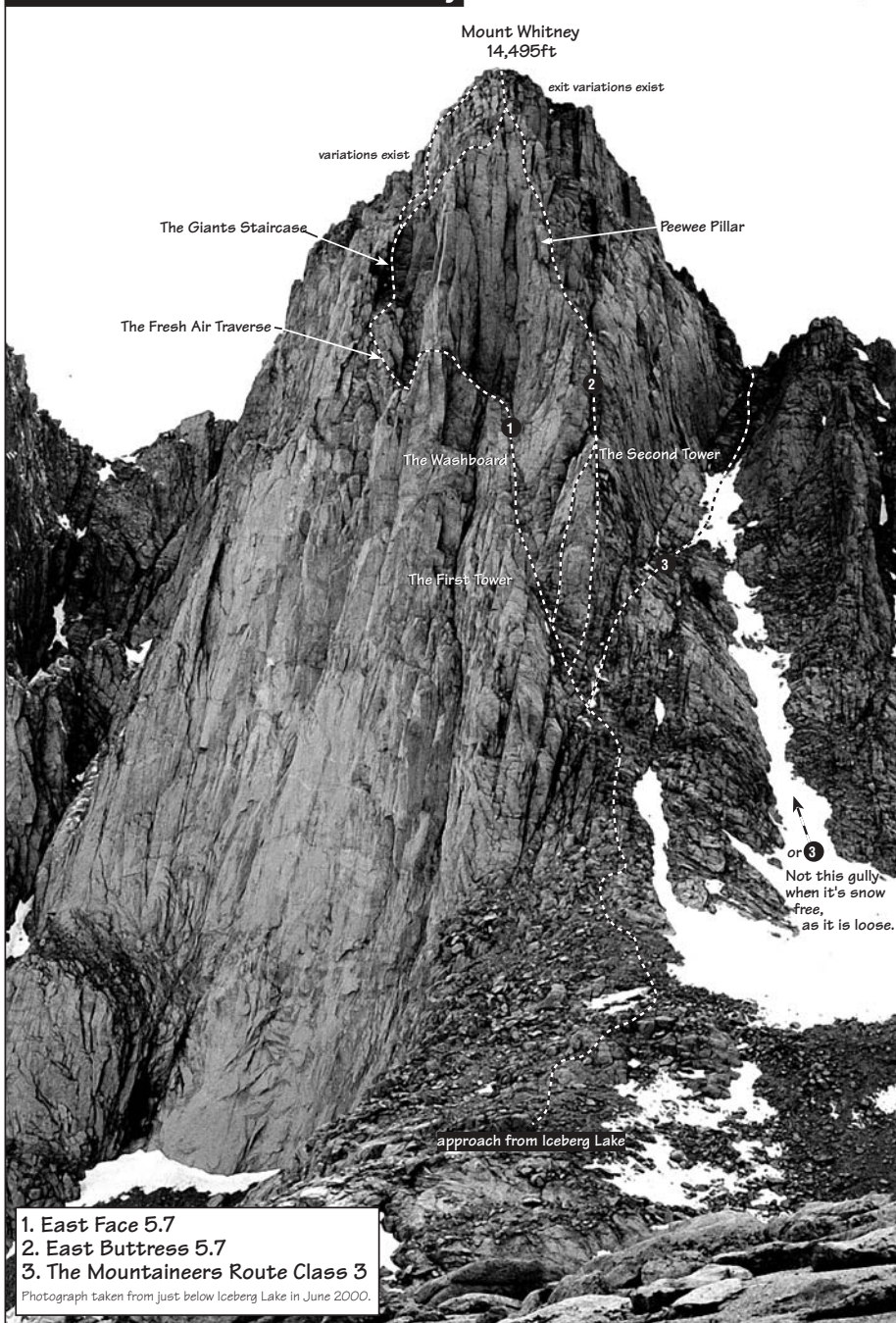
After taking a break on the good flat boulder here cross the creek. Ignore the trail that heads into the willows on the south side (left) of the creek. The creek crossing will take you now below the rock walls of the north side of the canyon and scramble up here squeezed between rock and willows until you hit the creek again. The route now does a hairpin turn and climbs the "Ebersbacher Ledges" This is class three scrambling across and diagonally east up the ledges, looking for cairns that mark the way. Also take note of your surrounding for the return trip. (Many tired climbers head east down the ledge too far on the descent, end up getting cliffed out and having to climb back up.) Once at the top of the ledges the route turns west (left) again. Do not follow the use trails above the drop off into the creek (people have fallen off here in the dark or on the gravel covered slabs above the creek) but head up on a trail until you are now below the walls on the north side of the canyon. There is a great trail here through the sand. Keep traversing and climbing taking a high line where possible across a couple of short rock slabs until the trail starts to switchback up on the north side of the canyon. Pass through a small lush wetland and cross the creek coming in from the right. Stop here and enjoy getting splashed by the spray.

Climb a little further and take a break alongside the creek draining Lower Boy Scout Lake. (10,350 feet). Cross the creek and enter and area of Foxtail pines with some campsites. Cross some talus and pick up the trail on the south side of the canyon. There are lots of trails here, but find one that stays low and crosses an area of large talus to the far side of a shallow gully closer to the creek. Avoid the trails on the left side and head towards a giant house sized boulder. From directly under the boulder ascend up and right to find the trail that passes through the willows and emerges onto an open rock slab. The goal now is to cross the creek to the north side and follow up alongside of it on open slabs. Look for cairns here. Do not stay on the south side for more than a short distance above the house sized boulder. (Staying here will only lead to more willows and more frustration). Follow up the calf burning slabs crossing small water courses to end up on the large granite slabs north of all of the water. (This area can be tricky in early season when the streams are full). At the top of the slabs head up and left to find a trail through the talus. Turn left at the top of the talus through some willows, step over the creek to the last group of battered pines on the south side of the creek. (11,240 feet). There are some campsites here. If you are feeling tired these can be used or you can head up towards Upper Boy Scout Lake (11,300 feet) to find others. It is possible to climb the East Face and return here the same day and this avoids carrying loads higher, but makes for a longer climbing day.

From the trees follow up on the rock slabs southwards and pick up a trail that ascends over boulders and a short slightly steeper step onto the slopes that form the terminus of the ridge and cliffs above Upper Boy Scout Lake. Once here there are many trails but they all converge as you round the corner of the ridge and reach the spot where you finally get your first glimpse of Keeler Needle and the East Face of Whitney.

Keep following up the trails until you reach an open flat sandy spot. Climb one of the trails on the moraine wall above this to where it flattens out into boulders and talus. Take a horizontal line over this looking for cairns and look for the best trail that traverses the steep slope beyond. This trail is at about mid height and traverses horizontally across the slope. Do not drop down to the small valley below. At the same time ignore any trails that lead upwards to the cliffs above. Also ignore any other climbers above who mistakenly think that they can shortcut the approach by climbing through the "easy" cliffs above. They obviously do not have this guide and will soon regret their decision! If you end up climbing rock rather than talus you are going the wrong way. At the far descend a very small amount and find a trail that heads up and across a very short rock step and then directly upwards. Take heart, the crest above you marks the end of the approach and camp is near. Gradually the angle decreases and flattens out and Iceberg Lake comes into view. (12,645 feet).

The East Buttress Of Mount Whitney



1. East Face 5.7
2. East Buttress 5.7
3. The Mountaineers Route Class 3

Photograph taken from just below Iceberg Lake in June 2000.

CAMPING AT ICEBERG LAKE

There are many campsites around the lake on the south side. Sites can be exposed so anchor tents well. Marmots can be a problem here so do not leave food in the tent while you are out. Hang it from a boulder. Human waste is also a problem here so use those bags that the Forest Service provides and carry them out. Urinate well out of camp.

THE MOUNTAINEERS ROUTE

APPROACH

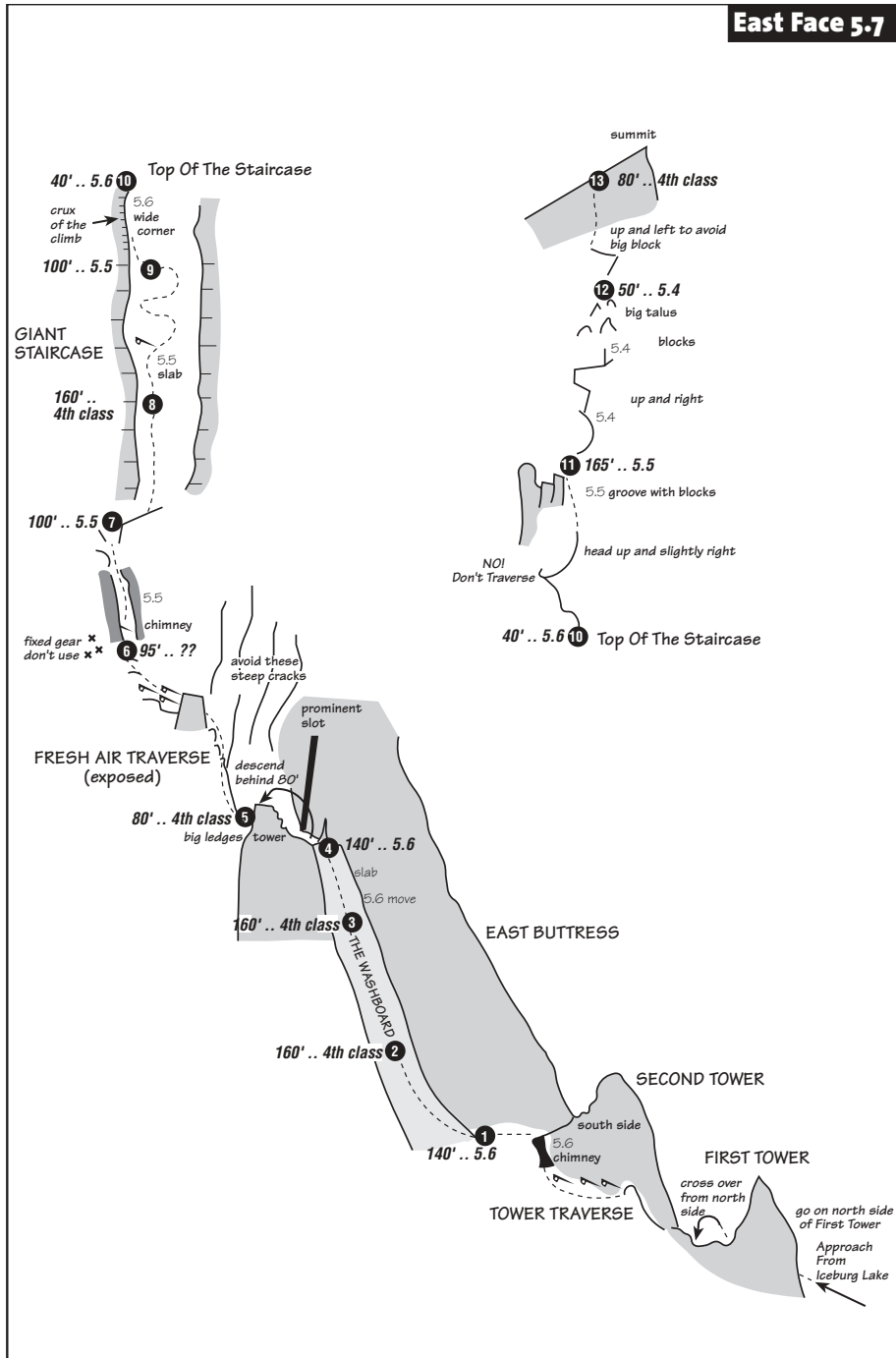
The climb is visible from Iceberg Lake and it is not far off at all. Head up directly towards the face climbing slabs, talus and sand. An ill defined gully drops from below the east buttress and to the left of the Mountaineers Route. Head towards the left side of this, get into the gully, climb it and then at it's top exit left. This gully has plenty of loose rock so be aware of this and if there are parties above or below be extra careful. In fact it is by far best to be the first party out of camp to avoid rockfall here. Take the left branch of the gully and got to it's top and platforms behind the First Tower. From here you can look down the substantial drop of the lower east face. This is the spot to gear up.

THE CLIMB

DESCENT

Back the way you came????? or down the trail.

East Face 5.7



APPROACH

The climb is visible from Iceberg Lake and it is not far off at all. Head up directly towards the face climbing slabs, talus and sand. An ill defined gully drops from below the east buttress and to the left of the Mountaineers Route. Head towards the left side of this, get into the gully, climb it and then at it's top exit left. This gully has plenty of loose rock so be aware of this and if there are parties above or below be extra careful. In fact it is by far best to be the first party out of camp to avoid rockfall here. Take the left branch of the gully and got to it's top and platforms behind the First Tower. From here you can look down the substantial drop of the lower east face. This is the spot to gear up.

THE CLIMB

Climb a short left facing corner below the second tower looking for the horizontal line of weakness, ledges and small holds that mark the "Tower Traverse." Clip a couple of fixed pitons and enter a chimney at the end of the traverse. Ascend this awkwardly to a small ledge at the start of the "Washboard". (100 feet) Climb the "Washboard" for about 400 feet to where the wall above steepens abruptly and where a deep chimney is obvious. There is a ridge crest on the left and this is what you need to gain. Climb up over blocks and find a short 5.5 crack that leads to easier ground and a sloping slab that tops out on the horizontal ridge crest. Cross to the other side and drop down about 60 feet to a sandy ledge. Stop at the far end of this and take a break below the "Fresh Air Traverse."

Climb a short steep arete with nice holds and step left at it's top. Traverse left over blocks and flakes past several fixed pitons. Now climb up the face above with horizontal breaks and cracks aiming for a small chimney. Step into the chimney and belay here. This is not a long pitch, about 90 feet, but belaying short enables contact with the second to be maintained. Climb the chimney and step left, then back right to the base of the "Giant Staircase" Lots of loose rock here so take care.

The route above follows the deep cleft of the "Giant Staircase" up the center. Part way up there is a steep wall with a fixed piton. Zigzag back and forth taking the easiest line until you reach the top. The exit is a wide crack on the left side and in many ways this is the crux of the climb (5.6). Grunt up the crack and exit onto the ledge at the top. (60 feet).

Look up and to the right for a left facing corner and corner. Do not take the seemingly obvious traverse back towards the summit plateau; this will end in unpleasant slabs and gravel. Climb a long pitch and belay just below and area of blocks. Simuclimb to the top of the blocks and climb a short steep wall on the left. Not placing gear will enable the leader the flick the rope around for the second. The summit is just above and an easy scramble to the very summit. Here you can bask in the adulation of those who came up the "Trail Route" and autograph the breasts of nubie young women.

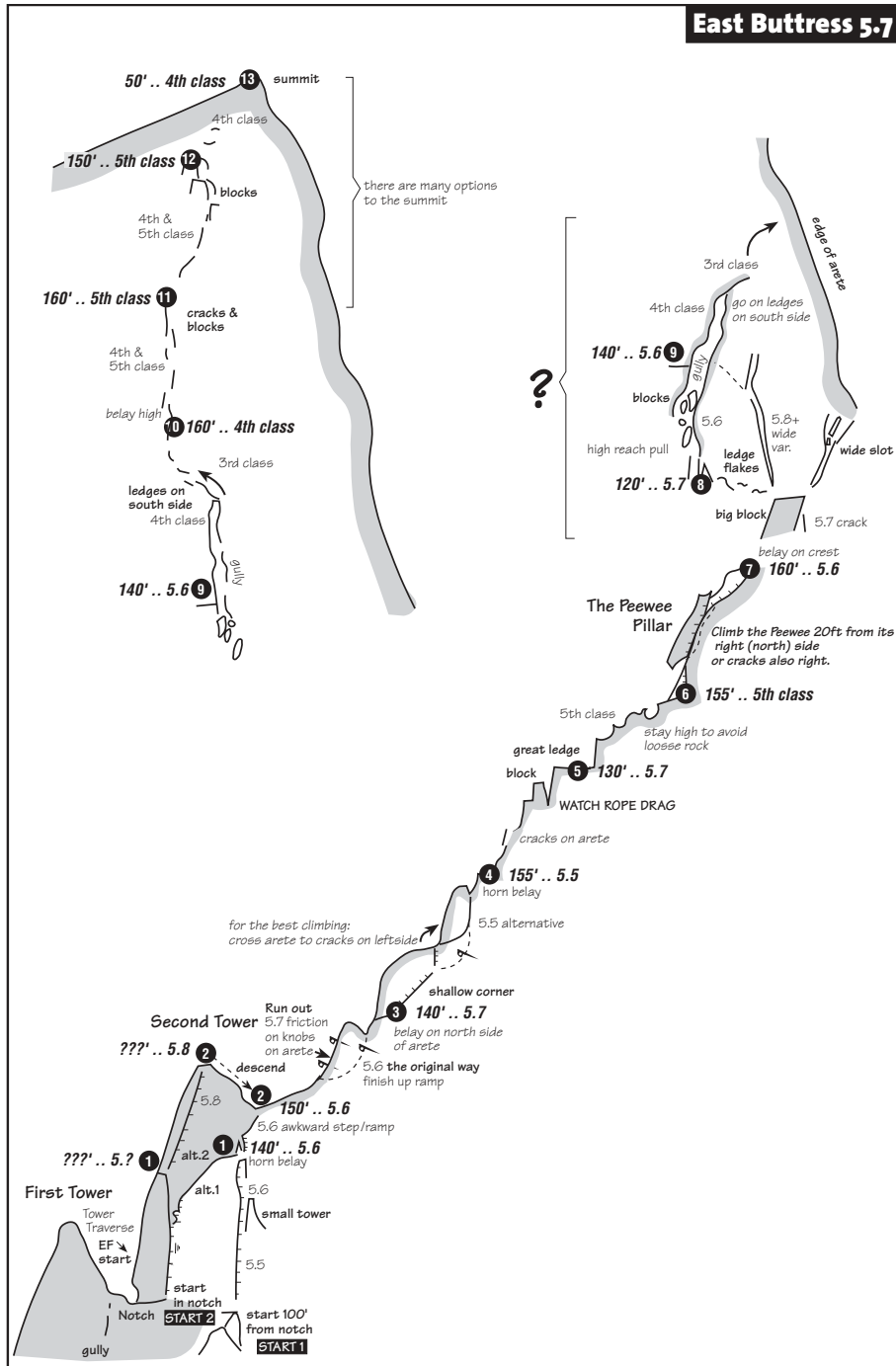
DESCENT

Head west past the summit hut and past the scenic outhouse. Continue down another hundred yards and start to look over the drop off on the righthand side. The descent lies down a ridge to the west of a broad slabby gully and should be marked by a rock cairn. Some guidebooks describe descending further down the summit plateau and then traversing back on ledges. This is the old original route but can involve traversing snow slopes that in late season are hard and icy. Numerous accidents have occurred on this traverse and the consequence is a long fall to Arctic Lakes. So we do not recommend this descent. From the top of the ridge you should be able to look down to a large tower that marks the top of the Mountaineers Gully. Start off on the ridge crest and after a couple of hundred feet move onto the right side. Reach a talus ledge that will take you across the gully on the left and then drop down slabs and short steps. At the very bottom cross back to the left side of the gully and the final hard moves to the talus below. Some people may feel more comfortable rappelling the final twenty feet to the flat below so look for an anchor here.

Head east now over the sand and talus until you can look down the Mountaineers Gully to Iceberg Lake. The route is now pretty obvious.

However as you descend the Mountaineers Gully will curve slightly towards the left. At this point there is a rock buttress on the right and a sloping slabby area. Traverse this and you will be at the top of the gully that you ascended to reach the start of the climb. Head down and cross to the left side of the gully and you will find yourself about 300 feet below the start of the climb.

Retrace your steps down to camp.



APPROACH

The climb is visible from Iceberg Lake and it is not far off at all. Head up directly towards the face climbing slabs, talus and sand. An ill defined gully drops from below the east buttress and to the left of the Mountaineers Route. Head towards the left side of this, get into the gully, climb it and then at it's top exit left. This gully has plenty of loose rock so be aware of this and if there are parties above or below be extra careful. In fact it is by far best to be the first party out of camp to avoid rockfall here. Take the left branch of the gully and got to it's top and platforms behind the First Tower. From here you can look down the substantial drop of the lower east face. This is the spot to gear up.

THE CLIMB

DESCENT

Head west past the summit hut and past the scenic outhouse. Continue down another hundred yards and start to look over the drop off on the righthand side. The descent lies down a ridge to the west of a broad slabby gully and should be marked by a rock cairn. Some guidebooks describe descending further down the summit plateau and then traversing back on ledges. This is the old original route but can involve traversing snow slopes that in late season are hard and icy. Numerous accidents have occurred on this traverse and the consequence is a long fall to Arctic Lakes. So we do not recommend this descent.

From the top of the ridge you should be able to look down to a large tower that marks the top of the Mountaineers Gully. Start off on the ridge crest and after a couple of hundred feet move onto the right side. Reach a talus ledge that will take you across the gully on the left and then drop down slabs and short steps. At the very bottom cross back to the left side of the gully and the final hard moves to the talus below. Some people may feel more comfortable rappelling the final twenty feet to the flat below so look for an anchor here.

Head east now over the sand and talus until you can look down the Mountaineers Gully to Iceberg Lake. The route is now pretty obvious.

However as you descend the Mountaineers Gully will curve slightly towards the left. At this point there is a rock buttress on the right and a sloping slabby area. Traverse this and you will be at the top of the gully that you ascended to reach the start of the climb. Head down and cross to the left side of the gully and you will find yourself about 300 feet below the start of the climb.

Retrace your steps down to camp.