



# **SOUTH** **Rising**

**In Pursuit of the South's  
Most Excellent 5.9s**

**By Whitney Boland**

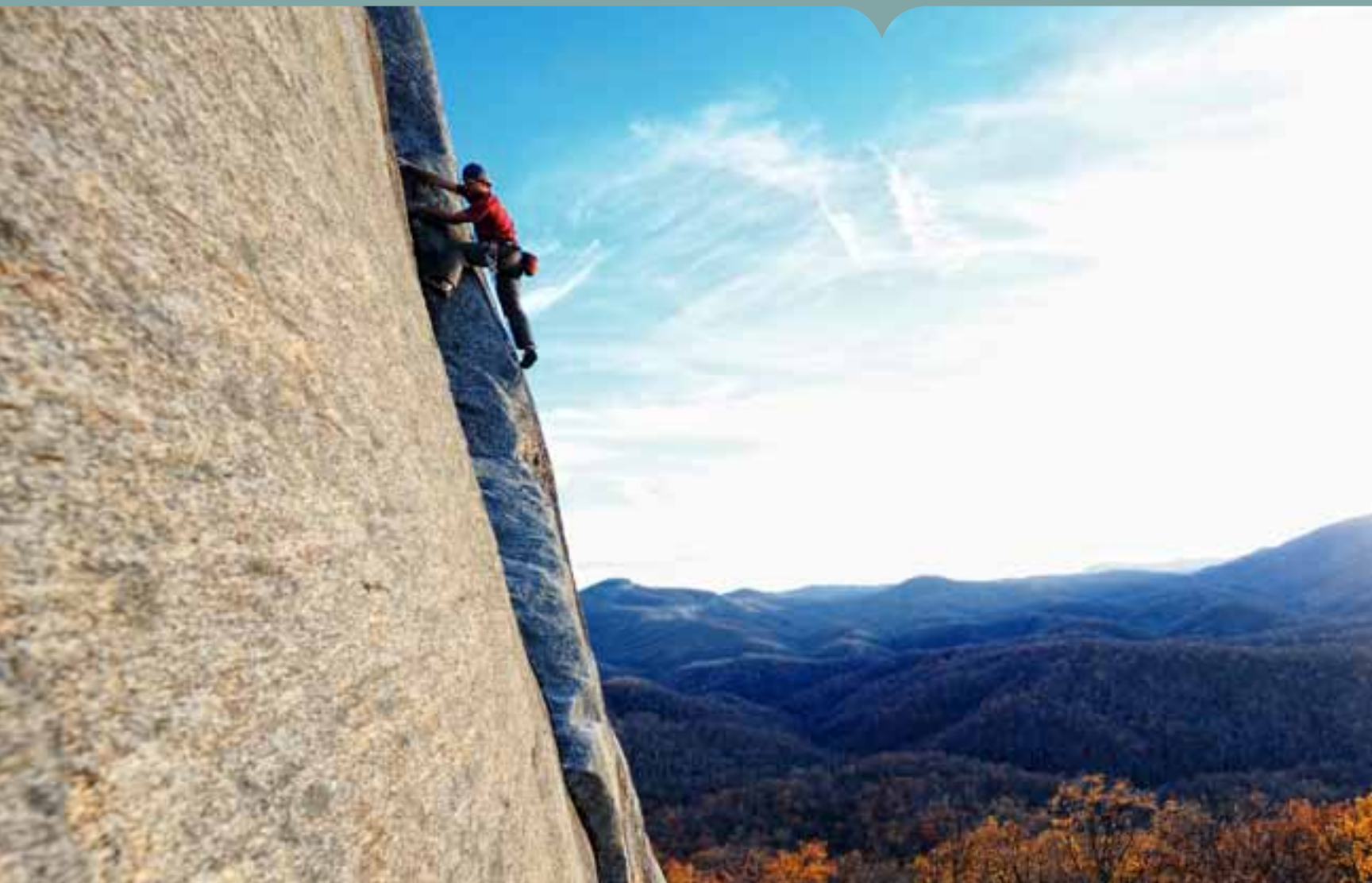
**Photos by Keith Ladzinski**

Exposed in the Linville Gorge, North Carolina, Jessa Goebel has the best climbing day of her life on *Dopey Duck* (5.8).









I'm not a badass trad climber. Actually, I don't own a single cam, tri-cam, nut tool or gear sling. My rack consists of 15 quickdraws and, when I'm pumped and cruxing, I grab them.

I fall. I project. I redpoint. I'm a sport climber.

After repeating this cycle for years, I was bored and frustrated. I warmed up on the same routes every day, then hopped on my project only to make incremental progress. It was time for something new. When I expressed my frustrations to a friend, he said, "Do something different. Why don't you go climb trad 5.9? I hear the South has some of the best."

Though I wasn't immediately sold on the idea, I thought it might help me get out of my rut. When I mentioned it to my Salt Lake City-based trad-climber friend Brittany Griffith, she quickly asked, "Do you even *know* how to trad climb?"

She had a point. Soon, my pride took over, and I felt like proving it to her and, more so, myself that I could do it. I took a week off work to explore this new ground, and perhaps find a whole new me. Following a well-established climbing tradition, I embarked on a road trip to search for the best 5.8 to 5.10 trad lines in the Southeast, figuring I might as well start with the cream of the crop.

Despite never having placed a cam, I wasn't nervous. No biggie, I thought. 5.9. I can climb 5.9 *all day long*.



**FAST FORWARD TO THE** trip's end. Five people, two cars, 1,200 miles, one camera, four fast-food stops, one overpriced dinner, 36 beers, and the discovery that trad climbing was not what I expected. I overcammed all my pro; futilely banged a nut tool against stuck gear and smashed my knuckles; wore slings like Rambo; body humped

a bulge (on top rope); got scared on 5.8; got scared on 5.7; swore off climbing; rekindled my love of climbing; and redpointed the most satisfying intermediate climbs I've ever done.

*OK, rewind.* We were in the car, and Pete Eiland was taking my friend from the Red River Gorge Dario Ventura and I through the Hickory Nut Gorge in North Carolina. We drove past trinket stores, bed-and-breakfasts, copious apple stands and markets that sell the local soda Dr. Enuf ("Enuf is Enough!").

Pete and his wife, Natasha, live in Brevard for its close proximity to many of North Carolina's best trad-climbing areas. He is passionate about trad—gritty yet self-effacing and polite. As the day's dedicated guide, he downshifted the Subi every time we'd pass an important landmark, like where *Last of the Mohicans* or *Dirty Dancing* were filmed. When we drove past Whitesides, one of the most feared crags in the Southeast for its hard, committing routes, his voice shrank to a whisper, as if the

## THE (5.9) BUCKET LIST:

**Finagle (5.9)**—T-Wall (TN)

**In Pursuit of Excellence (5.9)**—T-Wall (TN)

**Second Sun (5.9)**—Sunset Rock (TN)

**Pancake Flake (5.9)**—Sunset Rock (TN)

**Dopey Duck (5.9)**—Shortoff Mountain, Linville (NC)

**Hyperbola (5.10a R)**—Looking Glass (NC)

**Frosted Flake (5.9+)**—Rumbling Bald (NC)

**Tits and Beer (5.9)**—Looking Glass (NC)





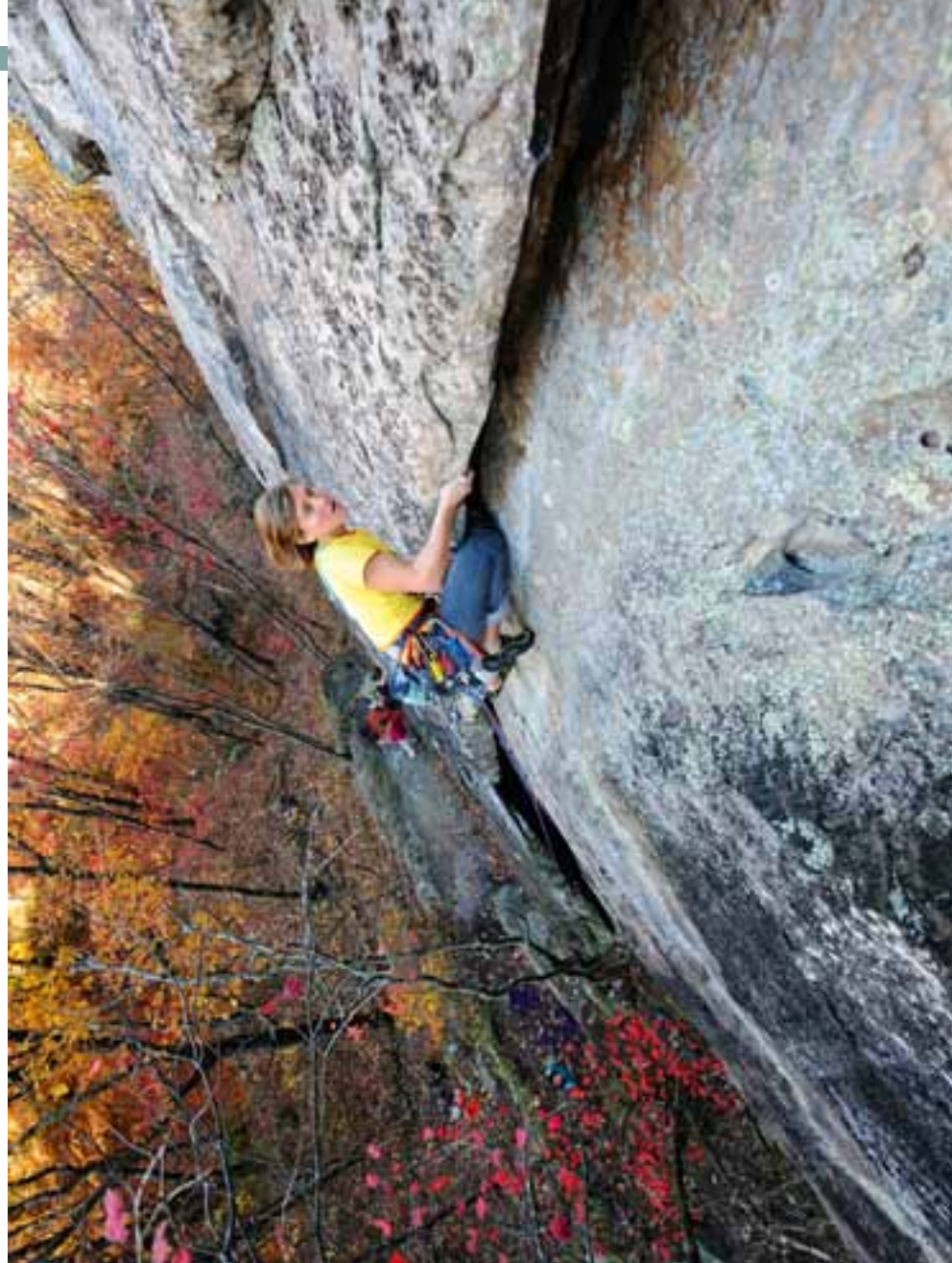
cliff were a monster that might awaken.

The air was cool and crisp, and the sky electric blue. The weather forecast for our road trip predicted five flawless November days. A good omen.

We wheeled into the Rumbling Bald parking lot, right behind our friends Pat Goodman and Jessa Goebel, who have been climbing together in North Carolina for years.

“Welcome to the Bald,” Pete said, as we skidded to a halt in the dirt.

Rumbling Bald is gneiss, with pumpy yet technical climbing on splitter cracks and flakes. The Bald’s easy access, year-round climbing and perfect rock with good trad routes, a few sport climbs and plentiful bouldering have made this a popular destination. In the early 1990s, the area was closed for a few years due to access issues with neighboring landowners, but by the late 1990s,



the crag reopened thanks to land purchases by the Carolina Climbers’ Coalition and favorable management plans by Hickory Nut Gorge State Park.

The Bald has been a hub for North Carolina climbing personalities since the early 1970s. Local legends and pioneers such as Jeep Gaskin, Bruce Burgess, Grover Cable, Don Hunley and Sean and Shane Cobourn were among the first to develop routes here.

The history of developing this and other key crags is rich and few are better at retelling it than Harrison Shull, photographer and North Carolina guidebook author who spent 20-plus years climbing and establishing routes here. While researching his guidebook to North Carolina, Shull interviewed Gaskins, who was so well spoken that you might think he

scratched for hours on pen and paper, yet he rattled insightful aphorisms off the top of his head.

“If you have depth to your soul and insights into life’s lessons and you didn’t get them from risk, then congratulations, but I can’t relate,” Gaskins said to Shull in one interview. “Climbing can be deltoids or it can be Zen; it can be runout or short, safe falls; it can be skies filled with lightning or crisp air ahead of mares’ tails. It is never standing in a grocery line.”

Eventually, by the 1980s, more new-school visionaries like Doug Reed, Tim Fisher (who later purchased and helped preserve the climbing area Moore’s Wall) and Porter Jarrard contributed routes to Rumbling Bald. *Hanging Chains* (5.12b), thought to be the hardest climb in North Carolina at the time, was ascended in a tag team, yo-yo style, and was a breach in tradition.

“This is one of the few, very few, North Carolina ‘transition areas,’” said Pat, meaning that locals today have accepted top-down establishment and equipping here.

Upon local recommendation, my first objective was *Frosted Flake* (5.9+) at the southwest-facing

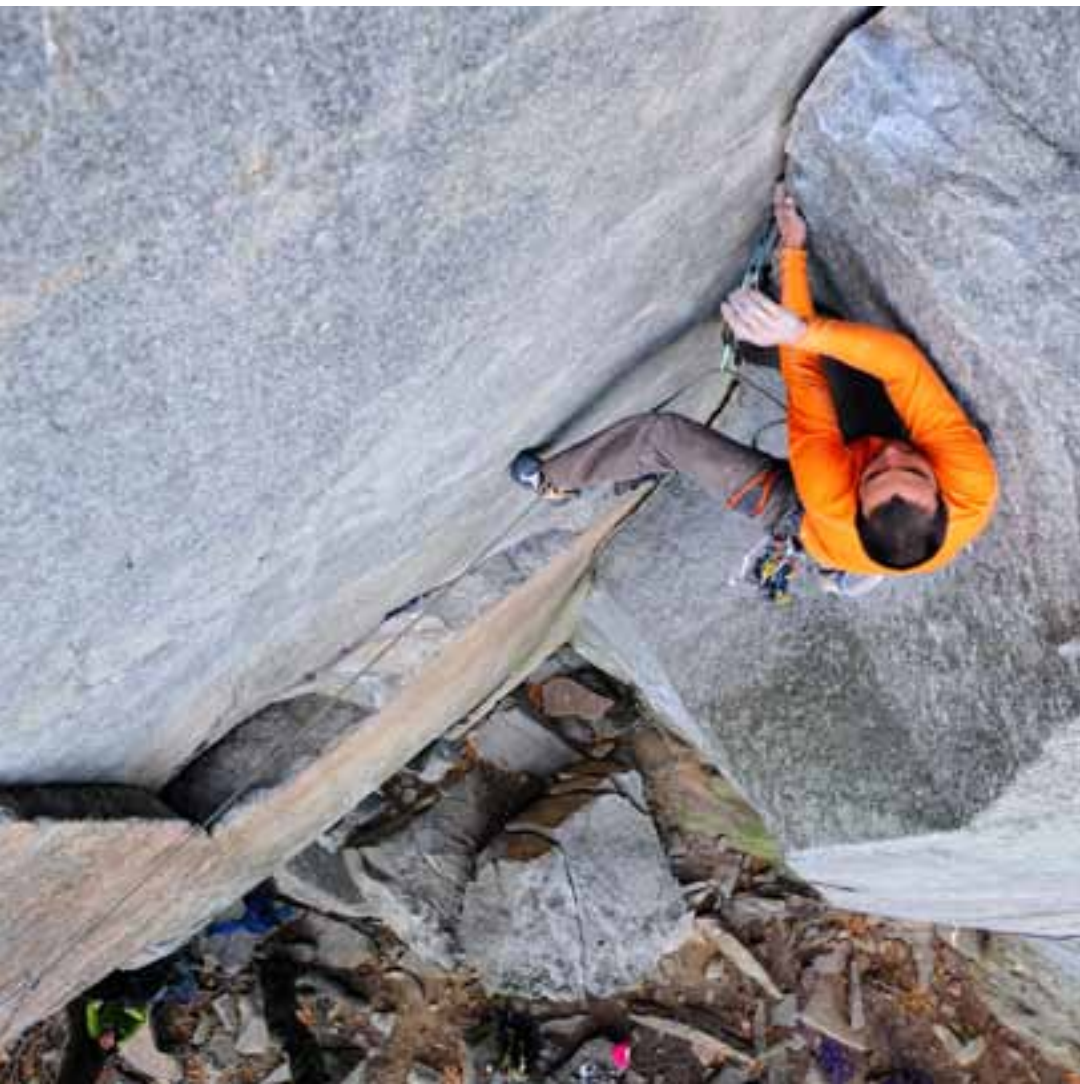
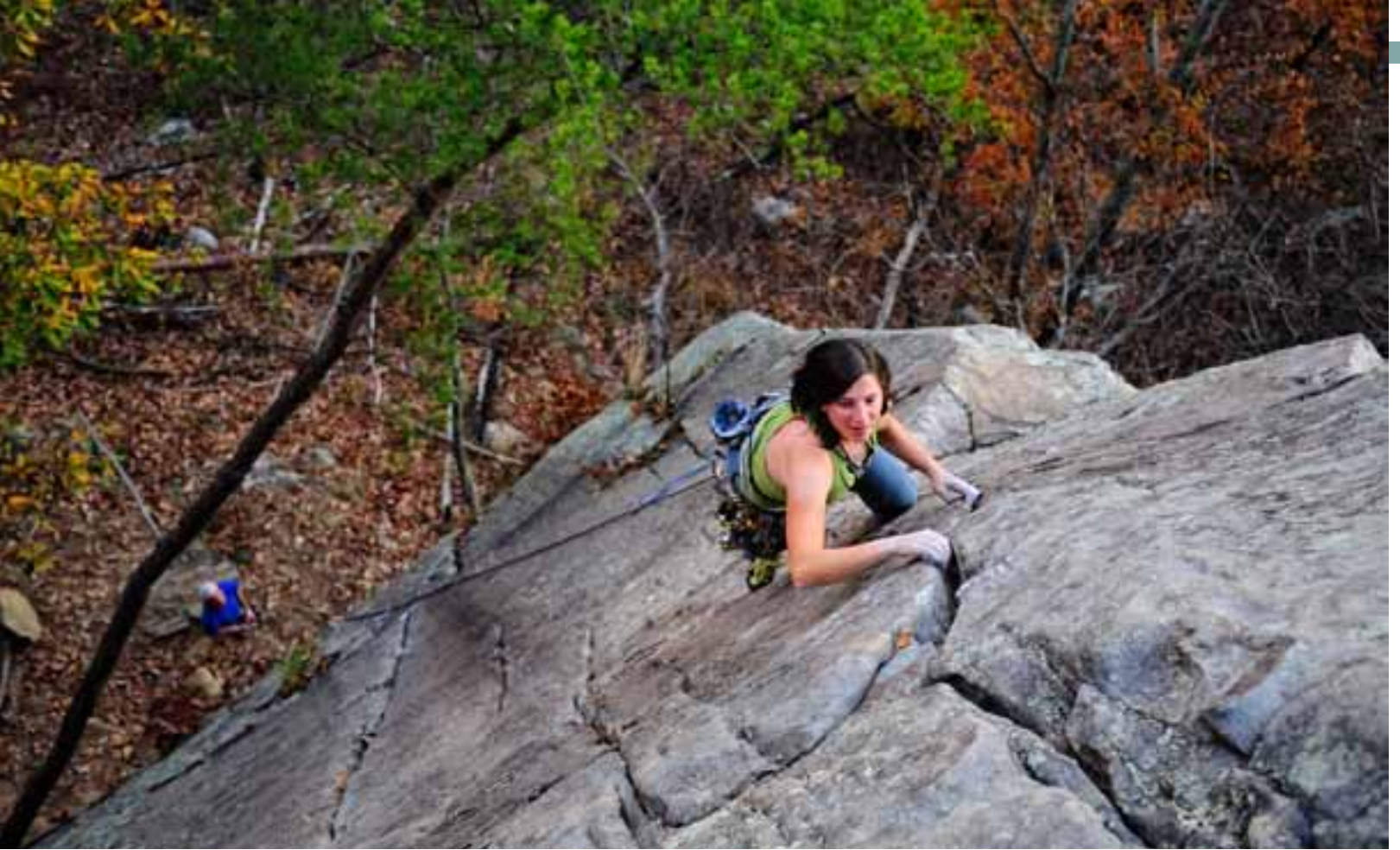


**UPPER LEFT:** Pat Goodman follows the curves of *Hyperbola* (5.10a R), Looking Glass, North Carolina.

**UPPER RIGHT:** Whitney Boland wishes she had more big gear on *Pancake Flake* (5.9), Sunset, Tennessee.

**LEFT:** Dario Ventura beefs up at a fast-food stop.





Cereal Buttriss. One of the first climbs to be established here, the left-facing flake is a stunning feature in gray gneiss, accentuated by faint white horizontal stripes.

“You gonna lead that?” Dario asked as I racked cams.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, “but first I’ll do *Granola*,” a 5.7 to the left of *Frosted Flake*. I climbed to the top of a boulder beneath the route and mounted the tiny, slopy crimps leading up to a roof. If, for whatever reason, you blew these crimps you would trundle 20 feet to the ground. This vision flashed through my head as I reached an undercling in the roof. I hesitated, but remembered I was on a 5.7. I pulled it together and finished the route.

Jessa, Pat and Pete styled *Frosted Flake*, climbing *inside* the crack, like good trad climbers. Dario and I geared up and, like good sport climbers, liebacked the whole thing.

“Whitney, here’s what you need to do,” Dario said. “Get on a climb, place a few pieces, and just take a whip. When your gear holds, you won’t be *scurred* anymore.”

I wasn’t scared, I assured him, merely hesitant.

“On 5.9?” he said. “Haven’t you climbed 5.14?” He paused. “You’re joking, right?”

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**DAY TWO FELT LIKE THE** first day I’d ever climbed. In the parking lot for Looking Glass, Pat stood next to his van, absorbed in the mechanical motion of organizing his rack.

I packed and unpacked my quickdraws and counted my energy bars to look as if I was also doing something important.



**LEFT:** What looks to be an arete climb at first, *Finagle* (5.9) lures Jessa Goebel onto tricky face climbing at the T-Wall.

**LOWER LEFT:** Dario Ventura plugs into trad on *Invisible Airways* (5.10), North Sides, Looking Glass.

**RIGHT:** Goebel copping a rest on the infamous sketchy mixed climb *Waste Not, Want Not* (5.12c), at North Sides.

**LOWER RIGHT:** After dispatching the heady first pitch, Pat Goodman is rewarded with this splitter on *Hyperbola* (5.10a R).

“You ready?” Pat said flatly.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, shoving my harness, which I’d just pulled out, back into my pack.

He locked the car and we headed down the trail toward the Looking Glass ultra-classic *Tits and Beer* (5.9).

A New Mexico native, Pat has lived in North Carolina the last nine years, establishing testpieces at crags across the state, including Looking Glass. An old, stubborn soul in a young, sturdy body, he has a dark sense of humor. He wears a backwards baseball cap over his disheveled hair, and his face is square, a bit gruff and unshaven.

He turned and looked at me, his bright blue eyes squinting in the sun. “Exciting,” he said, smiling. “That’s how I’d describe the climbing here.”

We continued hiking and fell into a rhythmic pace.

“Here’s a story,” Pat said. “Pascal Robert and Arno Ilgner were climbing the *Glass Menagerie* [5.13a] back in the early 1980s when they noticed some of the few bolts looked bad. So they went back to replace those, hanging on the old ones to drill the new ones.”

Above a roof pitch was more technical climbing, and they added some bolts there on rappel.

“It started a huff among a few locals,” Pat said. “Eventually, Pascal went back up, led the pitch and took out those one or two bolts with his hands and finished the climb with a huge runout. Like, ‘It’s not such a big deal, but who wants to climb it now?’”

The leaves crunched under our feet as we hit the end of the path leading to the base of Looking Glass. The daunting 650-foot granite wall bulged out, smooth and shapely as a marble.

This was not a typical day of cragging for me, and I felt ashamed, as though I had been

**I body humped the bulge until I was actually lying on it. 5.9! I was getting pissed! I thought about the times I said trad climbing was for has-beens.**

approaching rock climbing too narrow-mindedly. The mental landscapes of a sport climber and a trad climber are at opposite sides of a wide valley, and I was lost somewhere in the middle.

People were climbing at Looking Glass well before the birth of sport climbing. The rock lends itself to meandering routes with horizontal placements, marginal gear and knee-knocking runouts. In the



mid-1960s Bob Watts, Steve Longnecker and Bob Gillespie established *The Nose* (5.8), perhaps one of the best-known, and now most popular, climbs on the Glass if not in North Carolina.

Other Looking Glass highlights include a visit by Henry Barber in the 1970s, when he stunned locals with the first free ascents of *Out to Lunch* (5.11a) and *Cornflake Crack* (5.11a), climbed back to back. There is also Jeep Gaskins and John Bor-



stelman’s Grade IV masterpiece, *Glass Menagerie*, established in 1980, and freed at 5.13a in 1995 by Pascal Robert, Arno Ilgner and Kris Kline.

Recent developments have included occasional retro-bolts to protect blank faces, but the ground-up ethic and minimal protection are still respected at Looking Glass and everywhere in North Carolina.

At the base we traversed a slab over to a hol-





**LEFT:** Whitney Boland *In Pursuit of Excellence* (5.9), T-Wall.

**RIGHT:** Dario Ventura uses sport-climbing technique to lieback *Frosted Flake* (5.9+), Rumbling Bald.

of *Hyperbola* (5.10a R), with a classic left-facing lieback flake sweeping down the giant granite face like a J. It was just a few hundred yards to the left of our route. As we approached the climb, we met Jessa, Dario and Keith Ladzinski hiking over from Looking Glass's North Sides, one of the steepest walls here. I belayed Pat as he tiptoed up the 5.8 R first pitch. But even Pat, who has redpointed 5.13R/X on gear, lamented that he was a bit scared. It felt good to know that, no matter who you are, no one is above feeling a flutter of fear when faced with a pendulum fall on a runout friction slab.



**"GREYHOUND, PLEASE."**

The waitress stared at Keith with a dumbfounded look. "Vodka and grapefruit juice," he explained.

We were in Asheville, North Carolina, ordering drinks while Dario, son of Miguel Ventura of the famed Miguel's Pizza in the Red River Gorge, talked about his new favorite rap song, "Raise Up." It was midnight, and we were all smoked from traveling, driving and sleeping on floors for the last three days. Soon the talk turned to tomorrow's adventure at Linville Gorge.

"Well, *Groover* at Laurel Knob is pretty quintessential North Carolina climbing, but *Dopey Duck*, you can't hardly miss," said Pete.

"I've been waiting to climb *Dopey Duck* all my life," Jessa said.

"All your life?" Dario asked. "Since you were zero?"

"All my *climbing* life," Jessa clarified with a curling smile. Jessa, dark-haired, dark-eyed and of Polish descent, jokes about her "people," drinks Budweiser because it is the "King of Beers" and cusses a lot. But at home, she has a garden and secretly thinks puppies are irresistible.

"I hear it's puppy," Jessa said.

"I can do puppy," I said.

"Yeah, Whitney, because you're a sport climber," Jessa said.

We ordered another round as conversation shifted to a video of the bolted *Proper Soul* (5.14a) in the New River Gorge being climbed on gear.

"The cameraman taking the photos was hanging on a bolt *two feet* away," grumbled Pat. "Look at the photos. There are draws hanging all over the route. If he freaked out in the middle of a crux he could have just reached over and clipped a draw." "But he didn't," I said.

"I'm not taking away from his ascent, don't get me wrong. What he did was badass. But the way it was hyped up as R/X with all the gear *clearly* on there." Pat paused and took a swig. "I'm just saying."



**"THIS IS GOING TO BE** the best day of my *climbing* life," Jessa said. That morning we had hiked the 45 minutes to Shortoff Mountain in the Lin-

lowed-out bowl where *Tits and Beer* begins. The guidebook says it "provides the easiest way to the top of the Sun Wall," and that it used to be known as the "world's hardest 5.8."

Pat handed me a small rack, and I climbed out right to a set of anchors, the only bolts on the route. On the second pitch, Pat moved up a water runnel and through a series of the wall's quintessential "eyebrows"—horizontal slits the size of pasta bowls that line the rock like ladder rungs. Eventually, he surmounted a bulge and soon I heard a distant call that he was off belay. The rope pulled taut and I started climbing. I felt insecure and shoved my hip against one side of the water groove, shaking my head at my ridiculous technique. Then I approached the "crux," a slopy section you have to high step and stem.

When I first started climbing, I thought that trad climbing was something you do when you get too old and weak to sport climb. I grunted and wrestled

with the water runnel, eventually arriving at the anchor—feeling completely spent.

The next pitch traversed left for 30 feet, then worked up through Michelin Man bulges with insecure horizontal placements. I watched Pat traverse, laugh nervously, then mantel and disappear.

When it was my turn, I climbed out and heel-hooked, then hopped off my left foot. It felt awkward and I was somehow stuck, my right leg and half of my body beached on the bulge and the rest dangling like a rag doll. I body humped the bulge using my left leg as a pumping lever, until I was actually lying on it.

5.9! I was getting pissed! Padding around for a foothold so I could press out the mantel, I thought about the times I said trad climbing was for has-beens with "sport climbing is neither" bumper stickers on their station wagons.

After topping out and rapping off *Tits and Beer*, we had roughly one hour to do the first two pitches



ville Gorge to climb *Dopey Duck*.

Linville Gorge, the wildest area we'd visited thus far, is a 14-mile slash of rhododendron and steep gneiss buttresses. Known as the Grand Canyon of the East, the Linville Gorge is 21 miles from the closest town. The upper tier of the Gorge was dark and charred after two fires, in 2002 and 2007, wiped out the vegetation. Beyond the devastation, a vista of green rolling hills and distant blue mountains extends to infinity.

*Dopey Duck* was amazing: well-protected horizontal ladder rungs that were pumpy and as fun as sport climbing.

"That was badass!" Jessa said, atop the third pitch. She laughed at herself, her eyes squinting "The best!"



**DAY FOUR AT THE T-WALL.** We had driven from Asheville to Chattanooga the night before, gotten up early and hiked in to one of the best trad and sport crags in the South. Compared to the adventuresome climbing in North Carolina, the T-Wall, I thought, should feel like a day at the spa.

"Looks like we're sun-bathing today," Keith said. It was the middle of November and we were sweating in shorts and T-shirts.

The T-Wall sits like a golden crown high above the Tennessee River. Routes stack together like books here. Rob Robinson spearheaded development in the early 1980s, and was called "the bus driver of hard trad climbing in Tennessee" by Harrison Shull for his 5.13 gear routes of the late 1980s.

We warmed up in the sun, and then moved left to *Finger Lockin' Good* (5.10c). I was finally feeling comfortable with my gear placements, and my mind had steadied. I could just focus on the climbing.

We geared up and dispatched *In Pursuit of Excellence* (5.9), a perfect left-facing corner, and then next to it, *Finagle* (5.9), a less aesthetic route but one with good movement and exposure.

Further right, we looked at *Super Nova* (5.13), an infamous, rarely repeated roof with a cryptic crux. Robinson's first ascent of *Super Nova* in 1986 earned him an invitation to the Great Debate: the famous summit held by the American Alpine Club that same year to discuss top-down versus ground-up ethics.

We climbed until the sun hung low in the sky, suspended as if strung from wire. Dark orange light splayed off the mountaintop, casting a fiery glow on the rock.

We ate barbeque at Shuford's, washing down turkey legs and Polish sausage with massive quantities of sweet tea. Tomorrow, the final day of our road trip, we would visit Sunset.



**SUNSET IS ONE OF THE** Southeast's oldest climbing areas, but its history extends beyond climbing. Civil War placards offer details of the war once waged on the nearby Chickamauga National Battlefield. Bullet Southern sandstone with west-facing exposure, Sunset sits on the west brow of Lookout Mountain, just 15 minutes away from downtown Chattanooga.

"Where are these baller routes?" Dario asked.

We'd walked down the trail only to find a broken cliff line. Our friend had told us that the climbs were just at the bottom of the trail, but, like hospitality, sandbagging is a Southern virtue.

We continued down the trail, and soon arrived at the main bluff. We decided to do *Pancake Flake*, a detached sheet of rock that is hard as nails and swallows big gear. I surprised myself by walking a number 4 cam up the route until there was only one fixed pin between me and the ground.

In retrospect, I find it strange, but also encouraging that, in that moment, I was completely comfortable.

After a fun but short day of climbing, we stood atop the wall, peering out at the miles of rivers and valleys that extended brightly before us. It was the perfect vantage point to watch who was coming and leaving. I imagined Civil War soldiers on lookout at our perch, letting the history

come alive in my mind.

To be honest, I had been scared to trad climb. Moments like almost crapping myself on a 5.9 and later drinking beer on a tailgate laughing about it are my own little triumphs to relish. I never found the *best* 5.9 in my abridged tour of the Southeast, but in stringing together each crag—each unique place with its distinct personality, rock types and style—I felt as though I got to play a leading role in the story of what it means to be a Southern climber.

As we drove away, I asked Dario if climbing eight, only eight, classic Southeastern trad routes had been worth the trip.

"Does a trad climber shit in the woods?" he replied.

*Whitney Boland, based in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is glad she has found trad climbing ... before she got too old to do it.*

