

# VERTICAL TIMES

NEWS FOR  
CLIMBING  
ADVOCATES

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## FEELING THE BURN: WILDFIRES ARE IMPACTING CLIMBING

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THE NATIONAL PUBLICATION OF



Protect America's Climbing

# Letter from the Director



Well, it's official. Climbing is now an Olympic sport, and it was so cool to see American athletes bring home medals in competition climbing this summer. I foresee a whole new generation of kids inspired to get strong and crush, embracing the joys of both indoor and outdoor climbing.

At the same time, the pandemic drags on, and we've just come through a fire season of historic proportions. All of these changes in the world around us—and in the climbing world—can be a bit unsettling. We often turn to climbing when faced with these kinds of challenges, finding refuge and peace with time spent outside. But now, we may even be questioning whether climbing itself is threatened by all this growth and a rapidly changing environment—will it be sustainable into the future?

I know there are so many of us in the community who are wrestling with these big questions and looking for ways to connect to this conversation. We feel you, and at Access Fund we're thinking hard about the future to make sure all climbers have an opportunity to pursue their passion for generations to come. In this issue of the *Vertical Times*, we'll share some of our hopes and dreams, as well as some of our concerns for the future.

As Access Fund celebrates its 30th birthday this year, our community has a lot to look back on and be proud of—battles fought and won, beautiful places purchased and permanently protected, trails built, routes rebolted, public lands defended. All of this work was done by climbers for climbers through years of hard work and a no-nonsense approach to getting things done.

But the threats are changing, and we have to evolve. As we prepare for the future, Access Fund has refreshed our mission statement along with our vision for the future and the values that guide our efforts. We have made sustainability a central tenet of our work. And we are putting an even greater focus on supporting and engaging more people because we know that community is the key to conservation and stewardship.

Everyone has an important role to play in taking care of the places we all care so much about. In this issue of the *Vertical Times*, we highlight some inspirational people who are promoting diversity and justice throughout the climbing community, strengthening our collective work, and spurring innovation in how we relate to and protect the land around us.

We also take a deep dive into wildfires, climate change, and what this all means for the climbing community. These are huge issues, but we have to grapple with them and think through how to protect the climate, how to protect climbing, and how to protect our community.

Thank you for supporting Access Fund and for being an advocate for climbing, for the land, and for our community. If you haven't already done so, please consider making a tax-deductible donation before year-end to help Access Fund continue this critical work.

Happy Holidays,

Chris Winter  
Executive Director

*Mikey Shaefer, Zion National Park, Utah, ancestral lands of Nuwuvi (Southern Paiute), Pueblos, photo by Tara Kerzhner. On the cover: Paige Claassen, Flatirons, Colorado, ancestral lands of Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute, photo by Tara Kerzhner.*



# ACCESS FUND'S VISION FOR THE FUTURE >>>>

As we look to the future and reflect on the explosive growth in climbing, now is the time to prepare for the challenges ahead. Access Fund is charting a course that will protect the future of climbing—ensuring sustainable access, protected and conserved land, and a community of inspired advocates. We'll be doing the same great work you've come to know from Access Fund over the last 30 years, and we have updated our mission, vision, and values to better reflect our evolving role in the climbing community and our long-term goals for the future.

## A Bright Future

There is no organization better poised to steer the growth in climbing in a way that protects the lands we love and sustains us as climbers. We are honored to continue serving the climbing community for many decades to come.

### Our Mission

To lead and inspire the climbing community toward sustainable access and conservation of the climbing environment.

### Our Vision

All climbers of today and tomorrow have the opportunity to share in the joys of climbing and are inspired to protect and care for the places we climb.

### Our Values

**Connection and Purpose** — We believe that our connection to the outdoors brings us together as a powerful voice for protecting the places we love.

**Partnership** — We are stronger when we work together, whether we are sharing a rope, building a trail, or meeting with legislators and land managers. We support our partners and celebrate their work.

**Belonging, Justice, and Equity** — We believe all climbers have an important role to play in stewardship, conservation, and advocacy. We foster and support a community where all people feel respected, welcomed, and able to fully engage in climbing and outdoor recreation. We honor the Indigenous people who have cared for the land since time immemorial, and we are grateful for the opportunity to enjoy those places.

**Respect and Integrity** — We operate with integrity. We respect each other and the natural legacy we have inherited. We are true to our word and build trust through our actions.



# Bears Ears

*Bears Ears National Monument, Utah, ancestral lands of Navajo, Ute, Ute Mountain, Hopi, and Zuni, photo by James Q Martin.*

On October 8, Access Fund Executive Director Chris Winter visited the White House to watch President Joe Biden sign a proclamation to restore protections to Bears Ears National Monument in southeast Utah. The signing ceremony brought home a victory to a years-long battle to restore protections to this incredible landscape, which is sacred to Native American Tribes and home to world-class rock climbing.

Biden’s proclamation effectively undoes President Trump’s 2017 order to reduce the monument by nearly 85% to open the area to mining and energy extraction. Access Fund took a legal stand against Trump’s reduction on day one, and the outcome has been awaiting a decision in Washington D.C. District Court; however, on his first day in office, President Biden signed an executive order to review the boundaries and conditions of Bears Ears National Monument.

For years, Access Fund has worked in close collaboration with the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, as well as other conservation groups, in its strategy to defend Bears Ears National Monument. Access Fund is thrilled to celebrate this victory alongside the Native American and conservation communities.

“We are absolutely elated that President Biden stood up to protect Bears Ears National Monument and conserve this national treasure. This is a huge win for Indigenous people in the greater fight for America’s public lands,” says Chris Winter, Access Fund executive director, who was invited to the White House for President Biden’s signing of the proclamation. “This

proclamation not only protects climbing and the vast cultural and scientific resources at Bears Ears, but it also helps to uphold the integrity of the Antiquities Act and protects all national monuments around the country. It also recognizes the importance of outdoor recreation in these places.

*“Together, climbers and Native American Tribes advocated for Bears Ears National Monument, and we are thrilled that President Biden has corrected course on the prior administration’s shortsighted and harmful decision to disrespect the traditional values and origin stories of multiple Tribes,” says Aaron Mike, Access Fund native lands coordinator.*

Access Fund filed a lawsuit just days after President Trump’s December 2017 executive order to reduce the monument, arguing that the president’s order violated both the Antiquities Act and the United States Constitution. As a result of President Trump’s 2017 executive order, a vast majority of Bears Ears lost landscape-level protections, and approximately 40% of

# Restored!

the climbing areas in the original Bears Ears National Monument lost national monument status—including Valley of the Gods, Harts Draw, Lockhart Basin, and a portion of the climbing at Indian Creek. President Biden’s proclamation has restored those protections.

“Climbers deeply appreciate the experience of climbing in an undeveloped landscape that offers incredible opportunities to enjoy a unique cultural and historical story,” says Erik Murdock, Access Fund vice president of policy and government affairs. In a recent survey of climbers by Access Fund, 95% of respondents were in favor of restoring and even expanding the national monument. “Defending Bears Ears National Monument is about more than just protecting the climbing sites themselves, but also protecting this unique experience for generations to come.”

Winter added, “On behalf of Access Fund, we would like to thank the many thousands of climbers from around the country who supported the legal battle over Bears Ears for three long years. Their advocacy helped elevate the importance of protecting the integrity of this national monument as a top public lands priority for the Biden administration. We would also like to thank all the volunteers and partners who continue to steward the Bears Ears landscape to ensure a respectful and sustainable recreation experience.”

From 2016 to 2020, public lands have faced unprecedented threats, and the fight does not end here. Access Fund—along with the Tribes and other partners who have worked so hard for so long—is committed to ensuring that Bears Ears National Monument and all public lands remain protected and respected in perpetuity.



*Top: Access Fund and our partners in the White House! Left to right: Taldi Harrison, REI; Adam Cramer, Outdoor Alliance; Chris Winter, Access Fund; Jessica Turner, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable. Bottom: President Biden signs the Bears Ears Proclamation at the October 8 ceremony.*





# It's Our 30th Birthday

**COME CELEBRATE WITH US!**

**SAVE THE DATE!**  
**MAY 12-15, 2022**  
**DENVER, CO**

Access Fund is turning 30! Join us for climbing, community, and birthday cake to celebrate three decades of protecting America's climbing and chart our community's bright future.

# ACCESS FOR ALL

By James Edward Mills

Like most teenagers, Aden Conrad has difficulty expressing himself. Words don't come easily to him. Over the summer, on a visit to the Memphis Rox Climbing Gym in Memphis, Tennessee, I simply asked him, "What do you like about rock climbing?"

After a moment's hesitation, he wrapped me up in a bear hug. Pinning my arms to my sides, he crushed the air from my lungs as he lifted me off the ground and kind of wiggled me. He giggled, proud of his display of strength and enthusiasm. When he set me down, the smile in his eyes above his face mask told me everything I needed to know. As I recovered from his powerful grasp, I could see his joy and excitement, a deep abiding passion. Aden doesn't just like rock climbing. He loves it.

In the mostly Black community known as Soulsville, the Memphis Rox Climbing Gym is at the center of a remarkable transformation. Just a few miles from the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, and in a town that erected a monument to the Ku Klux Klan founder, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a culture is emerging centered around equity and inclusion.

In the summer of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this state-of-the-art facility offered area residents more than the distraction of a compelling recreational activity. Set in the heart of the most economically challenged neighborhood in the city, the gym provided local folks with free meals, gently used clothing items, sundry toiletries (including hand sanitizer), and, of course, hope.

Established just two years ago, this pay-what-you-can operation is run as a nonprofit. Here, unlike at other climbing gyms, social status and economic stability are not barriers to access. As members of the community struggled through unemployment, housing insecurity, and limited health care, Memphis Rox modeled practices of human decency that created a safe environment for kids like Aden to manage the stress and anxiety of uncertain times and forge a pathway toward a more positive future. Though his education might have suffered during school closures through the pandemic, the gym's staff members volunteered to tutor Aden in math, art, and science between coaching sessions that nurtured his talents as a rock climber. And whenever possible, program managers create opportunities to take him and other aspiring young athletes to nearby climbing areas outside.

Efforts to overcome the many cultural divides that for decades have limited the diversity of outdoor recreation in general and rock climbing in particular are beginning to expand. Initial exposure to the sport among communities of color in urban areas like Memphis are going a long way toward identifying, engaging, and encouraging young climbers such as Aden. He and others like him are being given the chance to not only embrace the physical challenge of ascending vertical walls and deciphering complex bouldering problems indoors but also to seek out and experience natural features and surfaces outdoors. Through programs like Memphis Rox, the outdoor industry can deliberately and proactively inspire a new generation of avid enthusiasts who will work to protect and preserve the many wild places we all love.

Aden loves rock climbing because it has given him a place where he belongs. Despite the differences that separate him from his peers and had left him vulnerable to teasing and derision, Memphis Rox is where he feels "normal and

happy." The field of outdoor recreation can learn a valuable lesson through this example of how we can achieve a radical transformation by simply meeting the needs and interests of those in our community who most desire common compassion.

Those who truly aspire toward diversity, equity, and inclusion in the outdoors must insist that our natural areas are indeed for everyone. As we see more people of color, the differently abled, members of the LGBTQ+ community, the economically disenfranchised, and other marginalized groups venture out onto stolen land once occupied by Native Americans, we must demand that every cultural expression of humanity be recognized as equally valid. Only then will the outdoors be accessible to all.

*Photos from top: Aden Conrad (left) gets personal instruction from his friend and mentor Kai Lightner. Aden Conrad works a few moves on a boulder problem at Horse Pens 40. Armani Brown (left) with professional sport climber Kai Lightner getting ready for a bouldering session at Horse Pens 40. All photos by James Edward Mills.*



# ACCESS FUND DEPLOYS CLIMBER STEWARDS AT INDIAN CREEK



With an endless supply of world-class splitter cracks, unique cultural resources, and awe-inspiring views, Indian Creek in southeast Utah is the kind of landscape that inspires people to come back again and again. And it has boomed in popularity over the last decade.

But this increasing popularity is leading to greater levels of impact in the region, with folks unknowingly camping where they shouldn't and creating ever-expanding "mega" campsites that damage the environment. There are also growing concerns around improperly disposed human waste, impacts to cultural resources, and conflicts with nearby cattle ranchers.

We're excited to announce that we've put two Climber Stewards, Lauren Hebert and Johanna Cogen, on the ground at Indian Creek to help provide visiting climbers with information and resources to help them minimize their impacts at this increasingly popular and sensitive area.

"This is a spectacular and delicate landscape that holds thousands of years of native history," says Ty Tyler, Access Fund's stewardship director. "Visiting climbers need more resources and information in order to recreate responsibly in this landscape and take an active role in protecting it."

Earlier this year, Access Fund teamed up with the University of Utah to conduct a survey of climbers who visit Indian Creek to help gauge visitation and explore conservation and education strategies that can ensure a sustainable future for climbing at the Creek.

"We've heard from visiting climbers, BLM managers, and the nearby Dugout Ranch that growing visitation has been hitting the area hard and that there's a gap in our low-impact education efforts," Tyler says.

Nearly 80% of survey respondents supported the idea of putting stewards on the ground at Indian Creek during peak seasons to help educate climbers and provide them with the necessary information and resources to minimize their own impacts and fully understand the value of this incredible landscape. Among these impacts are human waste and growing issues with pet waste.

"No climber is perfect, and we all leave some trace from our adventures," Tyler says. "Each pack placed on the ground, each rope bag dropped at the crag, each crushing step on cryptobiotic soil, each plant crushed by a tire—all leave an impact. But we can take an active role in mitigating these impacts and protecting the places we love."

Beginning this fall, Climber Stewards became a seasonal fixture at the Creek Pasture and Superbowl campgrounds, playing host and becoming information centers for visitors. During prime climbing season, the Climber Stewards host regular "Climber Coffee" events to connect with climbers on the area's natural and cultural values and share Leave No Trace strategies to protect cultural heritage and native vegetation, as well as raise awareness around raptor closures and discuss our restoration efforts. They also visit area crags to share belays, give climbers up-to-date information on visitation, and provide tips for where to find less crowded crags.

The Climber Stewards also help BLM managers improve their decision-making processes by providing data and real-time information on climbing activity. They also support biologists as they monitor raptor habitats, archaeologists as they keep an eye on cultural resources, and botanists as they monitor for invasive plants.

The Climber Stewards' role is not a new one, and not one that Access Fund can take credit for. Successful Climber Stewards programs were already in place at Yosemite and Joshua Tree national parks, spearheaded by visionary local climbers who saw a similar gap in land managers' ability to connect with and share information that would allow climbers to recreate responsibly. These original programs have been led by a core group of incredibly dedicated climbers, advocates, and National Park Service staff members. A special thanks to Jesse McGahey, Bernadette Regan, Ben Doyle, Brandon Latham, John Lauretig, Eric Bissell, and John Connor for pioneering the Climbing Stewards model to protect our cherished climbing areas.

Land managers across the country are struggling to bring on permanent staff to help educate and manage impacts on the ground. Access Fund sees this as a critical gap that our community can help fill, taking a more active role in managing our own impacts and creating a culture of conservation within the climbing community.

"This is just the beginning," says Chris Winter, Access Fund's executive director. "We're taking what we learn from this pilot program at Indian Creek, and the visionary programs at Yosemite and Joshua Tree, to expand this program to other popular climbing areas from coast to coast."





Lauren Hebert and Johanna Cogen are Access Fund's first-ever Indian Creek Climbing Stewards. They gathered with the Access Fund-Jeep Conservation Team, Access Fund staff members, Native leaders, Access Fund staff members, Native leaders, and land managers for a multi-day training in early October. Photos by James Q Martin.



# Climbers Create Chattanooga's Newest Crag as a Haven for Families

By Elaine Elliot

As a child, Sandy Kinzalow had free reign to ramble and roam wherever she pleased on the wooded parcel of land her family owned on top of the Cumberland Plateau. She scrambled up boulders, played with bugs, jumped over crevasses, and hid in stony caves from dawn to dusk. In the 1970s, the land was wild and unkempt compared to the popular tourism sites such as Rock City and Ruby Falls just south in Chattanooga. Her countryside neighborhood rarely saw visitors, and no one seemed interested in exploring the vast ridgeline.

But decades later, outdoor enthusiasts contacted Kinzalow's father and asked if they could develop boulders on the property. What Kinzalow always considered "playing" seemed to have become serious sports called climbing and bouldering by Chattanoogaans. Little did she know the private playground of her childhood would soon open up for hundreds of climbers and hikers to enjoy.

In 2018, Access Fund contacted Kinzalow to purchase and conserve her beloved backyard. Her family avidly supported selling the land for conservation and recreation purposes. "It was important for us to protect the land," Kinzalow says. "If it's not protected, it really will only benefit a few people."

A year prior, the Kinzalows sold a portion of the property to the Cumberland Trail to help connect one of the sections. The Cumberland Trail has over 210 miles of trail from Chattanooga all the way up to the tip of Kentucky. The route follows the dramatic rocky ridge along the Cumberland escarpment and, once completed, will boast over 300 miles of unbroken trail. Well-known boulder fields and crags such as Pep Boys, Dayton Pocket, Laurel Falls, Buzzard Point, Deep Creek, and the Obed all border the pathway.

The Access Fund's purchase of the Kinzalow property, now called Dogwood West, was another critical access point to the Cumberland Trail and home to an underrated climbing spot.

"We didn't quite know how popular it'd become," says Zach Lesch-Huie, Access Fund's vice president of programs and acquisitions. "Once our property survey was complete, we realized we protected a really big chunk of the cliff line, so what became more of a bouldering access point turned into a sport climbing access point, too."

Since the Cumberland Trail State Park and Southeastern Climbers Coalition were both busy acquiring and fundraising for other land parcels, the organizations gave Access Fund the green light to spearhead the Dogwood West project.

Within the course of several years, the Access Fund Conservation Team and local SCC volunteers built a parking lot and trail system while local developers bolted new routes.

In 2021, Dogwood West was sold to the park. This Cumberland Trail State Park purchase meant every penny of the initial Access Fund purchase went back into the organization's revolving loan fund program to preserve future crags. "Dogwood is an ideal project where we were able to not only recoup our loan but reinvest and grow the fund for the next climbing area purchase," Lesch-Huie says.

Christian Leblanc, the owner of the Dogwood East campground, was one of the main route developers for the cliff line. He and local developers bolted over 30 routes, ranging from 5.6 to 5.13a.

The cliffs are around 50 feet tall, making Dogwood a great place for top roping or high volume days. The rock is full of unique features such as patina incuts, technical slab, and bulbous slopers.

"This region is littered with some of the highest quality stone," Leblanc says. "It's that bullet-white sandstone that's just so solid."

With short approaches and easy access to the top of each route, Dogwood is a family-friendly destination for anyone, including children climbing outside for the first time. Now kids can experience the alluring landscape just as Kinzalow did years ago.

Scattered below the cliff line is a collection of boulders ranging from moderate grades to V9, with a few first ascent (FA) potentials in between. Between Dogwood West, East, and other neighboring sectors, the boulder field is almost as big as Rocktown.

In wintertime, the boulders are becoming more and more popular for climbers seeking less-trafficked crags. Lesch-Huie says Dogwood is "serving Knoxville quite well" because the area is one hour away and much closer than Stone Fort or Rocktown. Nashville and Chattanooga climbers are also close by, making Dogwood an opportune crossroads for all Tennessee climbers to meet.



White sandstone cliffs at Dogwood West, ancestral lands of the East Cherokee, Shawandasse Tula (Shawanwaki/Shawnee), and S'atsoyaha (Yuchi).

Local brewery owner Kirby Garrison has seen a surge in visitation ever since he and his father opened Monkey Town Brewery in Dayton in 2015. “It makes the trip more worthwhile for [climbers] to come up here because we’re here,” Garrison says. “We never thought climbing would get as big as it did, but we did know there was an untapped resource of outdoor recreation here in Dayton.”

The family-owned brewery has collaborated with climbers, anglers, and runners on local events and projects since opening its doors. While the SCC hosted trail days at Hell’s Kitchen in the summer of 2018, climbers came to Monkey Town afterward for beer discounts after breaking a sweat building the trail systems for Dayton’s newest boulder field.

Similar to the symbiotic relationship between local restaurants and climbers, Leblanc established accommodations for visitors with his campground, which is nestled next to the Dogwood climbing. Now it’s convenient and easy for climbers to visit Dayton to camp, eat, and climb for a weekend in a scenic low-key climbing area.

“I’ve always been passionate about climbing’s people, community, and subculture, and to see it happen up here organically is a blessing,” Leblanc says. As the Chattanooga climbing community grows, Dogwood has proven to be a noteworthy escape from crowds for climbers of all ages, levels, and disciplines.

“It’s been extra meaningful to see the growth of new faces and people wandering into the climbing and just enjoying the heck out of it,” Lesch-Huie says. “I watched Dogwood go from nothing to something, and it turned into a really valuable thing. It’s an affirmation that this work is appreciated and worth it for crags both small and large.”

For details on routes, refer to *Chattbloc: A Guidebook to Chattanooga Bouldering* for Dogwood East boulders, the *Chatt Steel North guidebook* for Dogwood routes, and Mountain Project for Dogwood West boulders.

# Feeling the Burn

**WORSENING  
WILDFIRES ARE  
IMPACTING CLIMBING**

*By Laura Snider*

*Linville Gorge Wilderness, North Carolina, photo by LynnWillis.com.*

At the end of August, the Caldor Fire made a stunning jump across the spine of the Sierra Nevada and began a menacing run toward South Lake Tahoe.

The fire—only the second in recorded history to cross from one side of the Sierra Nevada range to the other—forced the evacuation of around 50,000 people and ultimately destroyed more than 1,000 structures. And while the neighborhoods around South Lake Tahoe were largely spared, much of the nearby climbing, including Lover’s Leap, was not.

The extent of damage to local climbing resources is not clear yet. The area burned by the Caldor Fire is currently under a U.S. Forest Service closure that does not expire until the end of March. But best guesses from locals based on burn area maps, vantage points from open roads, and word of mouth are that, along with Lover’s Leap, several other climbing areas have almost certainly been impacted by fire, including the boulders at Lake Audrain. Whatever the case, when the area is finally surveyed and the score is known, there will almost certainly be years of hard work ahead to mitigate the damage and fully reopen the areas to climbing.

Lover’s Leap and surrounding crags are not, of course, the first climbing areas to burn, and wildfires have always burned through the Sierras. But wildfires are worsening in the Sierra Nevada region and across the West, and with the increased risk of wildfire comes an increased risk to climbing resources. The weight of this increased threat—the dread that each year the smoke-choked fire season will drag on longer and longer and the helplessness as another crag or another gateway community is threatened by flames—is now impossible for the climbing community to ignore.

“It’s a pretty intense topic, especially for those of us who live in the West and are feeling the rapid increase in the intensity of the fire season every year,” says Access Fund Executive Director Chris Winter. “At Access Fund, one of our most fundamental values is a deep passion and respect for the places we climb and feel so connected to. Our role is to continue to help the climbing community to grapple with what it means to have those places face such significant threats as wildfires. We can’t withdraw and stick our heads in the sand. Our community has to step up into that conversation.”

*We can’t withdraw and stick our heads in the sand. Our community has to step up into that conversation.*

Access Fund is deeply engaged in thinking about what that conversation looks like and how the organization can bring its existing expertise in stewardship, policy work, and local community support to effectively address the impacts of wildfires on climbing.

## The Age of the Megafire

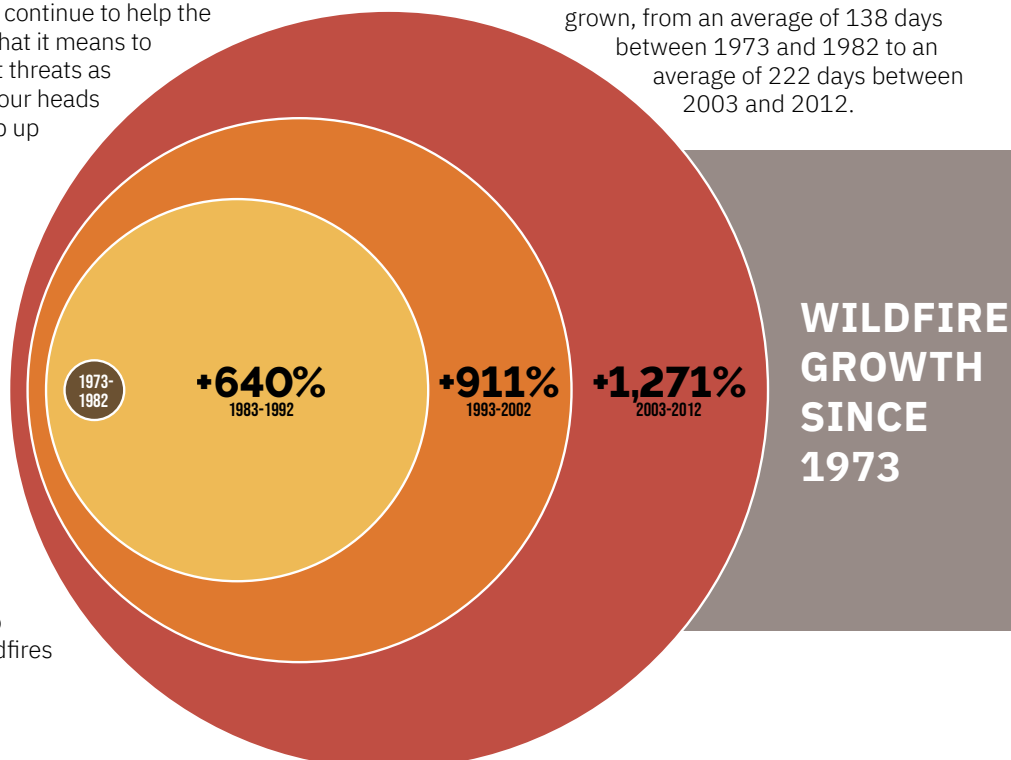
Fires have presumably burned climbing areas as long as climbing has existed. In the last decade alone, fires have burned Mount Lemmon and Jacks Canyon in Arizona, Echo Cliffs in California, and Rumbling Bald in North Carolina, to name a few.

Fires can play an important role in maintaining healthy forests, but in recent decades, fires, especially in the West, have become larger and more intense. Take 2020, for example. In California, wildfires burned more than 4 million acres, setting a new record and more than doubling the old record of 1.7 million acres burned, just a few years earlier in 2018. This year, about 2 million acres had already burned by the end of September—about the same amount that burned by that time in 2020—with months left in the fire season. Of California’s 10 biggest recorded fires of all time, eight have happened since 2017, with five burning last year. The No. 2 spot on the list will likely go to this year’s Dixie fire, which is the only other fire besides the Caldor to burn from the western slopes of the Sierras to the eastern.

The 2020 fire season also devastated other parts of the West. In Colorado, all three of the state’s largest recorded wildfires occurred last year, and two of those—the Cameron Peak and East Troublesome fires—burned into Rocky Mountain National Park.

The recent horrific wildfire seasons are not one-offs. Instead, they’re part of a decades-long trend of increasing wildfires that began in earnest in the 1980s. According to research led by Anthony Westerling at the University of California Merced, the area burned by wildfires in the West has been steadily increasing. In the decade between 1983 and 1992, the area burned increased by 640% compared to the decade before. The following decade (1993-2002), the increase over the 1970s was 911%, and by 2003-2012, the increase was 1,271%. The research, published in 2016, did not analyze the most recent decade, when record-breaking fires burned

across the West. The wildfire season has also grown, from an average of 138 days between 1973 and 1982 to an average of 222 days between 2003 and 2012.



What’s driving this increase? There are multiple factors that are likely playing a role, including a legacy of fire suppression and other land management strategies that have caused fuels to build up on the forest floor. However, the primary driver, according to scientists, is climate change. The West is getting hotter and drier with spring snowpack melting earlier, and the result—more flammable fuel—is directly linked with fire size and extent. A 2016 study found that climate change is responsible for half of the increase in fuel aridity in the West since the 1970s and a doubling in the area burned by fires in the West since 1984. As human-caused climate change continues, we can expect wildfire seasons to continue to become more extreme.

### Fraying the Fabric

Climbers in the West aren’t likely to be surprised by the dire statistics about increased wildfires. They’ve been living it season after season.

“It’s been years of getting worse and worse. Starting about eight years ago, there’s been at least one month a year when the smoke has been so bad that it’s hard to go outside, and the fires burning in the surrounding areas made it hard to climb where you want,” says Jen Dawn, president and treasurer of the Tahoe Climbing Coalition. “Having this fire start in our own backyard—burning through our boulders and our crags—it’s ominous and it’s dark and it’s scary.”

When the Tahoe Climbing Coalition and other local climbing organizations, including CRAGS (Climbing Resource Advocates for Greater Sacramento), finally have a chance to assess the damage, there will be a lot to take into account. For starters, fires can impact the rock itself.

“We’re talking about rock, so the good news is we’re not going to lose it to a fire,” says Katie Goodwin, Access Fund policy analyst and California regional director. “What we’ve observed is that the impacts really depend on the intensity and length of heat exposure to the rock and the type of rock.”

Anecdotally, an intense fire can cause granite to exfoliate. Climbers reported several inches of the rock shedding—along with some bolts—after Elephant Knob in the western Sierras burned in 2002, for example. Even if damage to the rock seems relatively mild, fire can impact bolts and other fixed hardware. Fires can melt out glue-in bolts and stress steel, but determining the actual damage to bolts at a particular crag is difficult. There’s just not much data about fire and bolts, and since the type of bolt used to protect climbing routes is not standardized, there are also a lot of variables. At Mount St. Helena, a Bay-area crag in California, locals chose to replace all the bolts in the areas with the most severe burns after a fire swept through in 2017, just to be on the safe side. Such undertakings are expensive, both in cost and in labor.

Beyond the rock and the fixed gear, fires can introduce a number of other objective hazards, including erosion and standing dead trees, or snags, which are often a major factor in a land manager’s decision to keep an area closed. Climbers discovered that the fire that burned through Rumbling Bald in North Carolina in 2016 scorched the soil that was holding boulders in place on ledges and top-outs, causing instability and rockfall.

The impacts of wildfires on climbing can also reach far beyond the area that is actually burning. Wildfire smoke can seriously impact air quality hundreds of miles away from the fire, creating conditions that are, at best, unpleasant and, at worst,

dangerous for people climbing outside. Heavy smoke forced the closure of Yosemite National Park in September 2020 when the air quality index hit 785 (AQI)—anything over 300 is considered a health emergency—even though there were no major fires actively burning in the park. At times during the Caldor Fire, Lake Tahoe registered the worst air quality in the world, with an AQI of nearly 450.

Extreme fire risk can also lead to the proactive closures of large swaths of public land. In October 2020, the U.S. Forest Service barred access to its lands up and down the Colorado Front Range, citing “unprecedented and historic fire conditions.” This order effectively closed a number of heavily used crags, including Boulder Canyon. This fall, a similar order went into effect when the U.S. Forest Service closed every national forest in California for a couple of weeks in September. Large swaths of California forests were also closed in 2020.

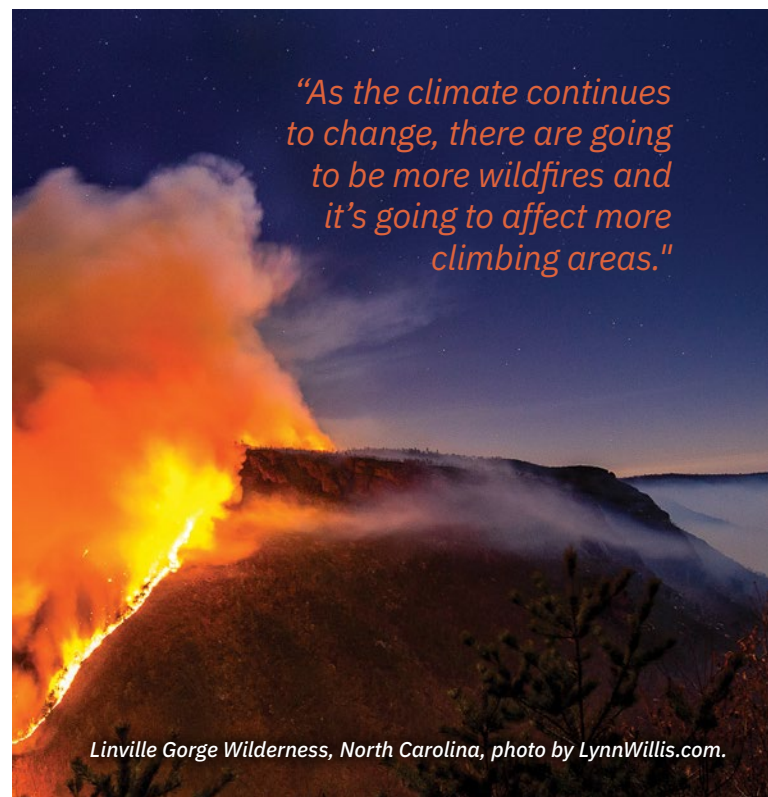
Fires also deeply impact the gateway communities that climbers gravitate to. “The impact to the community is so massive,” says Dawn, speaking about South Lake Tahoe. “The fire has been terrifying and uprooting. We had to leave our homes, and we all know people who have lost everything. There’s a community trauma we’re experiencing together.”

For many gateway communities near climbing, climbers have become an important economic driver as well as an integral part of the community itself.

“Wildfires affect us in so many ways, and one is the fraying of the fabric of these communities,” Winter says. “We want to be there for our community. As climbers, we’re really good at pulling together in times of adversity, and we’ll have to do that as we face the future.”

### More than Building Trails

The role that Access Fund and the larger climbing community must play as we face that future is broad, and it ranges from the immediate (How do we help restore access to a recently burned crag?) to the long-term (How do we advocate for smart climate policies?).



*“As the climate continues to change, there are going to be more wildfires and it’s going to affect more climbing areas.”*

Linville Gorge Wilderness, North Carolina, photo by LynnWillis.com.



*Caldor Fire, Lover's Leap California, photo by Chris Binder.*

Access Fund Stewardship Director Ty Tyler emphasized that land managers and nonprofits like Access Fund must deepen their partnership to address these threats. “As the climate continues to change, there are going to be more wildfires and it’s going to affect more climbing areas,” Tyler says. “We need to be prepared to step up and support land managers, and they’ll need to see us as part of the solution. Their jobs are hard enough, and these partnerships are critical.”

Groups like Access Fund can get critical work done in recreation areas in the aftermath of a fire. This includes assessing the stability of trails and base areas and working on restoration projects, all with the goal of promoting recovery from the fire and getting climbing areas reopened as safely and as quickly as possible. Nonprofit partners could also help reduce future fires by assessing fire risk in and around recreation areas, building sustainable trails that can be used as fire breaks and for firefighter access, and helping get the word out to climbers and other user groups about local fire risk and safety closures. Programs like the Access Fund-Jeep Conservation Team are already up and running and positioned to be a tremendous resource for land managers who are confronting the enormous challenge fires pose for public lands across the country.

“But we don’t just want to build trails,” says Access Fund Vice President for Policy and Government Affairs Erik Murdock. “We want to make sure our climbing areas don’t burn down in the first place.”

***“We don’t just want to build trails. We want to make sure our climbing areas don’t burn down in the first place.”***

Access Fund is working with its allies in Washington, D.C., to actively advocate for the Civilian Climate Corps, a program proposed by the Biden administration that would reimagine the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s for a new era. Like the original, the new CCC would put hundreds of thousands of young people to work, but this time their aim would be combating climate change.

In an executive order, President Joe Biden says the initiative will “aim to conserve and restore public lands and waters, bolster community resilience, increase reforestation, increase carbon sequestration in the agricultural sector, protect biodiversity, improve access to recreation, and address the changing climate.”

“We want to be part of the movement to mitigate climate change,” says Murdock, who has been working hard to ensure that legislation that funds the new CCC would provide a pathway to include Access Fund Conservation Teams, which would focus in large part on recreation infrastructure.

At a policy level, Murdock also sees a role for Access Fund in supporting new funding mechanisms and programs that address wildfire prevention and education as well as the firefighting response. A new era of wildfires requires rethinking old strategies for preventing and fighting fires, Murdock says.

Another critical function for Access Fund in the future will be educating climbers about what responsible recreation looks like during and after fires. The unpredictable nature of wildfires means that climbers will have to maintain flexibility in their plans so they can avoid destinations with fire or heavy smoke. To preserve access, climbers also need to heed the inevitable closures. And finally, it will continue to be important to think about when and how to visit the local communities affected by wildfires.

“There are a lot of people who still want to come here to recreate,” says Jay Sell, a Tahoe Climbing Coalition board member whose own home next to the Christmas Valley Boulders narrowly escaped the Caldor Fire. “But we’re not ready to recreate. It’s all closed. For the traveler coming here right now—there’s a lot of impact that could be avoided.”

Still, Sell and other locals appreciate how important tourism is to keeping their community vibrant and healthy.

“We are closed,” Dawn says. “Also, for our economy, don’t forget us. We’re still a cool climbing community, and when you can come back, do come back and shop local.”

# Can You Trust That Bolt?

## BOLT BASICS: WHAT EVERY CLIMBER SHOULD KNOW



You're on the redpoint burn of your project, staring down the crux move. Are you confident that the bolt below your feet will hold if you take a whipper? Do you know how to tell if you can trust it? This is not when you want to be worrying about the safety of the gear you're using, so before you make that next move, make sure you know how to identify when a piece of equipment may be unsafe.

Today, many climbers often take for granted the hardware that allows us to ascend otherwise unattainable cliffs and formations. But climbers have been using bolts since the late 1800s, and in the early days, decisions on what hardware to use were often driven by ease of use and accessibility, personal preference, and cost. Although there are significant rebolting efforts now taking place around the country to equip climbing areas with safer, more up-to-date equipment, there are still plenty of sleeping giants out there that should not be underestimated. This article will help you better understand and identify hazardous gear.

### Beware of These Types of Bad Bolts

In climbing, the term "bolt" is broadly defined to include any metal device meant to be placed or hammered into a pre-drilled hole in a rock face. Depending on the rock type and style of development in an area, bolts are held in place through friction within a drilled hole, an adhesive known as epoxy, or in some cases, both. There are several types of climbing bolts that can be found throughout the country, covering a wide range of uses and safety implications. Keep an eye out for these common types of outdated and worrisome bolts:

#### Button Heads and ¼-inch Bolts

Thanks to bolt replacement efforts, this variety of bolt—which was not intended to be used for climbing—is becoming increasingly rare at well-traveled cliffs. With that said, they can still be found whether exploring a local crag or spending the day in alpine environments. These bolts are typically compression-style bolts that act similarly to a piton: Their holding power relies on their being driven into a hole slightly smaller than the bolt's diameter. When encountering a button head or ¼-inch bolts, climbers should be wary. There are numerous incidences when these types of bolts have been removed with little more than a few hard jerks using a quickdraw, and while these bolts can vary in pullout strength in granite, consider them downright dangerous in softer rock, such as sandstone or limestone.



#### Sheath Bolts/Star Drives

The most common type of sheath bolts are Star Dryvins. Often called star drives, these bolts can be identified by the star stamped on their heads, but other varieties exist and the flat nail head should be the primary giveaway. This type of bolt tends to have a high degree of variability in terms of how bomber they are, making them unreliable and a cause for concern.



#### Self-Drill Bolts

When casually viewed, many self-drive style bolts can look a lot like modern 5-piece sleeve bolts, which are commonly used in modern bolt replacement efforts. However, a closer examination reveals a hex head that is larger than that of a modern bolt. While they can seem difficult to remove, the short bolt stud combined with a propensity for the drilling teeth to become dull prior to the bolt being fully drilled make these bolts something to watch out for.



#### Types of Climbing Hangers to Look Out For

It is also important to understand the differences between climbing hangers, which are the metal "loops" that hang off a bolt for clipping a quickdraw.

#### Homemade Hangers

Before hangers were produced commercially, climbers made homemade hangers with whatever materials they could find, ranging from hacked-off bedframes to full-on weld jobs. These hangers are old, often susceptible to corrosion, and unknown in their strength and durability.



#### Leeper

One of the most unsafe types of hanger a climber will come across is a Leeper hanger, which is easy to identify by its typically blackened color and semi-sharp edges compared to the rounded shape of a modern hanger. Leeper hangers were the first commercially made hangers designed specifically for climbing. However, because they were the first, not all the kinks had been worked out before they went into mass production. In fact, they were eventually recalled, but not until after entire crags were fully equipped with them.



#### SMC

These hangers came in two widths. The thin hangers—which are almost exactly the width of a single quarter and have a horizontal "SMC" stamp on the metal—were used from the late '70s to early '80s and are nearly as bad as Leeper hangers. The newer, thicker hangers—identified by a vertical "SMC" stamp—placed later in the '80s are about the width of two quarters and are stronger, but they're still very old and should be on the list for replacement.



Regardless of type or brand, worn hangers are nearly always a concern. The inner edge of virtually any modern hanger—where the carabiner rests—is relatively sharp and not meant for rappelling off directly. When this inner edge gets nicks or burrs on it, it can transfer that damage to your carabiner and, ultimately, your rope.



## Bad Climbing Anchors

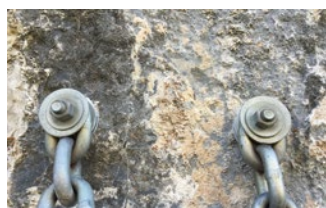
Here, we are specifically referring to anchors at the top of a pitch that are used for lowering to the ground or setting up a belay for the next pitch.

### Cold Shuts

These have been used on routes as recently as the '90s. There are two types of cold shuts, open and closed, and both are dangerous. Many cold shuts were welded in a climber's garage,



leading to great variability in strength. Explaining the danger of these anchors, Sandor Nagay wrote in *Climbing* magazine, "None of us would climb on a rope that our buddy wove in his garage, but many of us trust cold shuts implicitly." Nagay, a mechanical engineer, and Will Manion, a civil engineer, did extensive testing with cold shuts, including both  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch and  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch versions. The variances in strength were extreme, ranging from 2,120 pounds to 8,180 pounds, with almost all of them failing at the weld. By comparison, most modern bolt hangers have an average strength of at least 6,400 pounds, about twice the force a 175-pound climber can generate during a lead fall.



### Chain and Washer

Just no. The primary issue with this setup is that the space taken up by the washer and chain results in less of the bolt actually going into the rock. This can also result

in the bolt bending. Both of these issues combine to create a huge watch-out situation when it comes to the strength and integrity of the anchor.

## Other Safety Issues to Look Out For

Identifying different types of problematic equipment is just one piece of the puzzle. Climbers should also take these factors into account when determining the safety of a route or climbing area.

### Type of Metal

In most areas of the U.S., stainless steel is the standard for modern climbing bolts as it is more resistant to corrosion than previously used materials. In the early years of bolting, many route developers used plated steel, which is more affected by the elements and more susceptible to corrosion. You can easily tell if a piece of gear is stainless or plated steel. First, if your bolts don't specifically say stainless steel, they're not. Second, you can use the magnet test. If a bolt gets instantly drawn to a magnet, even a refrigerator magnet, it's made of plated steel and should not be used for climbing protection.

### Mixed Metals

Hangers that are made of a different type of metal than the bolt they are attached to are a huge safety concern. When metals are mixed, galvanic corrosion starts to happen at an alarming rate. Sometimes the mixed metal scenario is introduced when a well-meaning climber replaces only the hangers on the route and not the bolts. This can create the illusion of a safer route with solid-looking bolts, but beneath the surface, the bolts may now be corroding at a quicker pace.

## Spinners

One of the more common "bad bolt" reports shared by climbers is spinning or loose bolts. Every situation is different, but the most common issue tends to be that the nut holding the hanger against the rock face has loosened and needs to be tightened back down to the manufacturer's torque specifications. Modern 5-piece bolts can be a bit more complicated since a loose bolt head can allow parts of the bolt to become unscrewed. Even if bolt integrity isn't compromised, a spinning hanger allows greater leverage to be applied to the bolt, which reduces the overall bolt strength.

### Rock Quality & Anchor Location

Be mindful of where a piece of gear has been placed on the wall. For example, bolts placed in fractured rock, hollow flakes, crumbly sections, or too close to the edges of overhangs or arêtes may fail because the rock itself isn't strong enough to withstand the force of a fall.

### Type of Rock

Rock type plays a big role in determining whether or not a certain type of fixed anchor is appropriate for that area. Rock strength can vary significantly by rock type and can even vary from one crag to another of the same rock type. In general, modern mechanical bolts are ideal for areas with harder rock such as granite, situations where the bolt may need to be removed, or in alpine conditions. As they are extremely durable, glue-in bolts are more fitting for softer rock types and routes that see a lot of traffic.



## Key Takeaways

Being able to recognize a potentially dangerous piece of equipment is an invaluable skill and will allow you to continue doing the thing you love. Before your next trip to the crag, make sure you are familiar with:

1. How to identify old and hazardous fixed anchors
2. How to properly fix a spinner (avoid the route if you don't have the right tools)
3. The type of rock you're climbing on and what kind of fixed gear is appropriate there
4. How to connect with your local climbing organization to report any concerning pieces of hardware



## ADVOCATE SPOTLIGHT

# MOLLIE STOLBOV

We are thrilled to recognize Mollie Stolbov, a passionate Midwest climber, advocate, and community activist. She is the former leader of Madison Women Climbers and co-founder of Beta Bust, a new regional climbing and camping event for transgender, cis, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming folks who feel comfortable in women-centered spaces. With roots in bouldering, she enjoys all kinds of climbing, including multipitch when she gets the chance. Mollie wears many hats and also serves on the board of the Wisconsin Climbers Association, an Access Fund affiliate and powerhouse organization focused on community and stewardship of iconic Midwestern crags like Devil's Lake and Governor Dodge boulders.

## 5 QUESTIONS FOR MOLLIE:

### What's your favorite cause in climbing advocacy right now?

Inclusivity in climbing. This is a sport that every person can do and no one should feel like they don't belong. The more people who climb, the better this community will be.

### What does it mean to you to be a climbing advocate?

To me, being a climbing advocate means that I can impact the community in a positive way. If I can help make climbing more inclusive, it means more impact on all aspects of climbing. The more people who care about climbing, the better our sport, climbing lands, and history will become.

### What's your advice to new advocates?

Not to give up and always work to improve. Even if your first try is successful, what tweaks can you make to improve on your initiative? Also, surround yourself with people who care about the success of your advocacy and will challenge your ideas to help hone them. This will make you a better advocate and likely improve the work you are doing.

### What excited you the most about getting into the advocacy world?

I was excited at how much support we got from the community to expand inclusive climbing in Wisconsin. We created a grant program and were able to fund anchors courses, competitions, and a group outing in the first year! I think it will only grow in the future, so there are lessons to be learned about finding a way to make it sustainable year over year. Much like climbing, there's always another level to get to.

### Who is another climbing advocate whose work is inspiring you right now?

I have been so inspired by Kai Lightner and his work with his nonprofit organization Climbing4Change. He is laser-focused on climbing for all and making it accessible. I really admire his honesty and willingness to share his experiences with eating disorders and how it affects the climbing community. I can only imagine what he'll be doing in the next 10 to 20 years for climbing advocacy.

# News from the Grassroots Network



## California LCOs Respond to Historic Wildfire Impacts

Recent wildfires across California devastated communities and caused historic levels of impact to the environment. Local climbing organizations quickly mobilized to work with land managers to mitigate impacts at climbing areas—spreading safety information to climbers, evaluating fire damage, and working on restoration plans. We’re incredibly thankful to these LCOs for their quick responses.

## Southeast Wyoming Climbers Coalition

Access Fund is excited to welcome Southeast Wyoming Climbers Coalition (SEWCC) to our affiliate network. The group is based in Vedauwoo and will work to unify climbers around local access and conservation efforts in the region.



## Durango Climbers Coalition

Access Fund is also excited to welcome Durango Climbers Coalition (DCC) as an official affiliate partner. Access Fund looks forward to supporting this southwest Colorado LCO and its efforts to steward local climbing areas, build land manager relationships, and improve access to local climbing areas.

## LCO 101: Securing 501(c)(3) Nonprofit Status

Many local climbing organizations (LCOs) choose to file for a 501(c)(3) nonprofit designation in order to expand their programmatic footprint. This step helps turn your group of casual volunteers into a formal organization and helps you qualify for perks like tax exemption, additional liability protections, more grant opportunities, and tax-deductibility for your donors’ contributions.

While 501(c)(3) status is the standard for successful, sustainable nonprofits, it is highly protected by the IRS, and your LCO will be required to go through a detailed application process and follow specific rules in order to maintain your privileges.

If you’re considering taking this step for your LCO, here’s a brief overview of the process:

- ▶ First, you must obtain nonprofit incorporation in your state. Visit your secretary of state’s website for more information as the requirements for each one can be different.
- ▶ After confirmation of state incorporation, request an employer identification number from the IRS.
- ▶ Then fill out and submit Form 1023 (most common) or Form 1023-EZ (for smaller organizations) to officially apply for a 501(c)(3) designation with the IRS. Consider applying for an Access Fund Climbing Conservation Grant to cover the fees for the 501(c)(3) application.
- ▶ After your application is accepted, be sure to stay on top of reporting and other requirements to protect your new status.
- ▶ Reach out to Access Fund at [localsupport@accessfund.org](mailto:localsupport@accessfund.org) for help at any time. We’ve helped many LCOs successfully navigate the process, and we’re here to help.



# Featured Partners

## Black Diamond

Black Diamond has been a steadfast supporter of Access Fund for over 20 years, and our partnership has inspired a growing movement of climbing advocates to step up and protect our crags and wild places. Black Diamond has also committed to preserving the recreation lands that we love by making its products more sustainable and less impactful. We are pleased to partner with a company that shares our values of conservation and stewardship, and we deeply appreciate Black Diamond's support over the years with our climber education and engagement campaigns.



**Black Diamond**

## Epic Water Filters

We're excited to partner with Epic Water Filters in the sale of the brand's limited edition Nalgene's with built-in filters, as part of its 1% for the Planet commitment. Epic started by developing a bottle with a robust filter inside, so that people in countries with poor water quality could drink water without getting sick and, at the same time, reduce the need for single-use plastic water bottles. Thank you, Epic, for helping to leave the planet a little bit better than you found it (and with cleaner water, too).

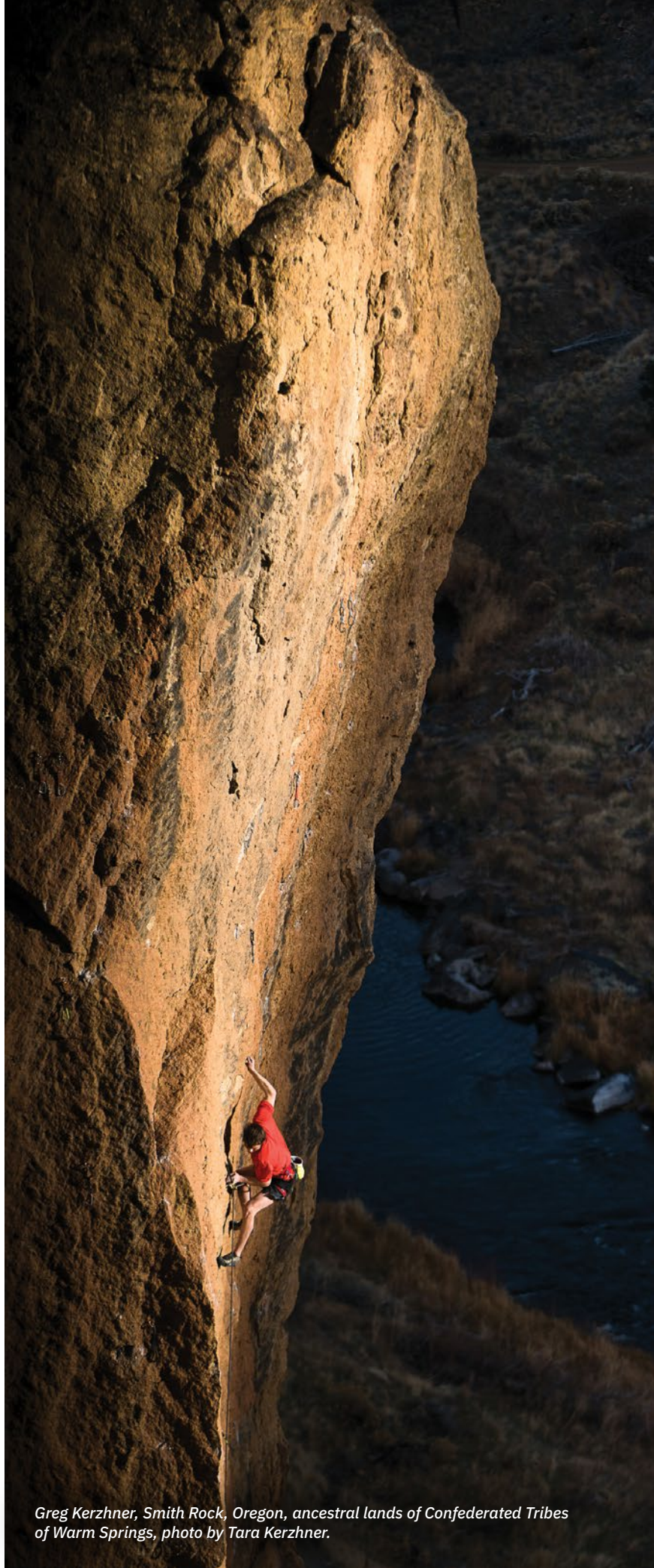


## Touchstone Climbing Inc.

We're proud to partner with Touchstone Climbing Inc., which owns and operates 13 unique gyms throughout California. From its owners to its belay staff to its route setters, Touchstone employees believe in creating a place where we can all come together and do what we love. Whether you are an experienced climber, a bright-eyed newbie, or just someone looking for a great place to work out, you'll find your place with Touchstone Climbing. At Access Fund, we understand that climbing facilities are integral to communities across the country, and we are thankful for the many years of support from Touchstone Climbing.



**TOUCHSTONE**  
CLIMBING



*Greg Kerzhner, Smith Rock, Oregon, ancestral lands of Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, photo by Tara Kerzhner.*

These partners are businesses that put their money where their mouth is to support the future of climbing. Please consider the important contribution these partners make to your climbing future. They support Access Fund and you. We encourage you to support them!

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Outdoor Research

### **Diamond - \$25,000+**

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### **Platinum Plus - \$15,000+**

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Clif Bar  
Outdoor Alliance

### **Platinum - \$10,000+**

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Paige Claassen, *The Fins*, Idaho, ancestral lands of Shoshone-Bannock, photo by Tara Kerzhner.



## Tara Kerzhner

Tara Kerzhner is an award-winning photographer, cinematographer, and accomplished rock climber. She was born and raised in Bend, Oregon, and Smith Rock is her heart’s home—even though she has graduated from living in a truck to an apartment in Boulder, Colorado.

Since grabbing her mother’s film camera as a kid, Kerzhner’s lifelong dedication to her art was set. A decade of adventure sports and rock climbing has since established her as one of climbing’s most sought-after storytellers. Today Kerzhner balances her passion for adventure sports photography with social and environmental storytelling. In some of her recent work, Kerzhner received a grant from National Geographic to bring an Indigenous-led perspective to the COVID-19 crisis on the Navajo Nation. She is also an active *National Geographic Adventure* contributor.

“Photography brings significance to my life and depth to my work,” says Kerzhner. “After all these years, the relationships I developed with the people I photographed became more meaningful than the photos themselves.”

You can learn more about Kerzhner and see her work at [tarakerzhner.com](http://tarakerzhner.com). Follow Kerzhner on Instagram @tarakerzhner



Shanjean Lee, *Smith Rock*, Oregon, ancestral lands of Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, photo by Tara Kerzhner.

# Staff and Board



*Emily Harrington, Ten Sleep, Wyoming, ancestral lands of Apsaalooké (Crow), Eastern Shoshone, Cheyenne and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, photo by Tara Kerzhner.*

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*Bears Ears National Monument, Utah, ancestral lands of Navajo, Ute, Ute Mountain, Hopi, and Zuni, photo by James Q Martin.*