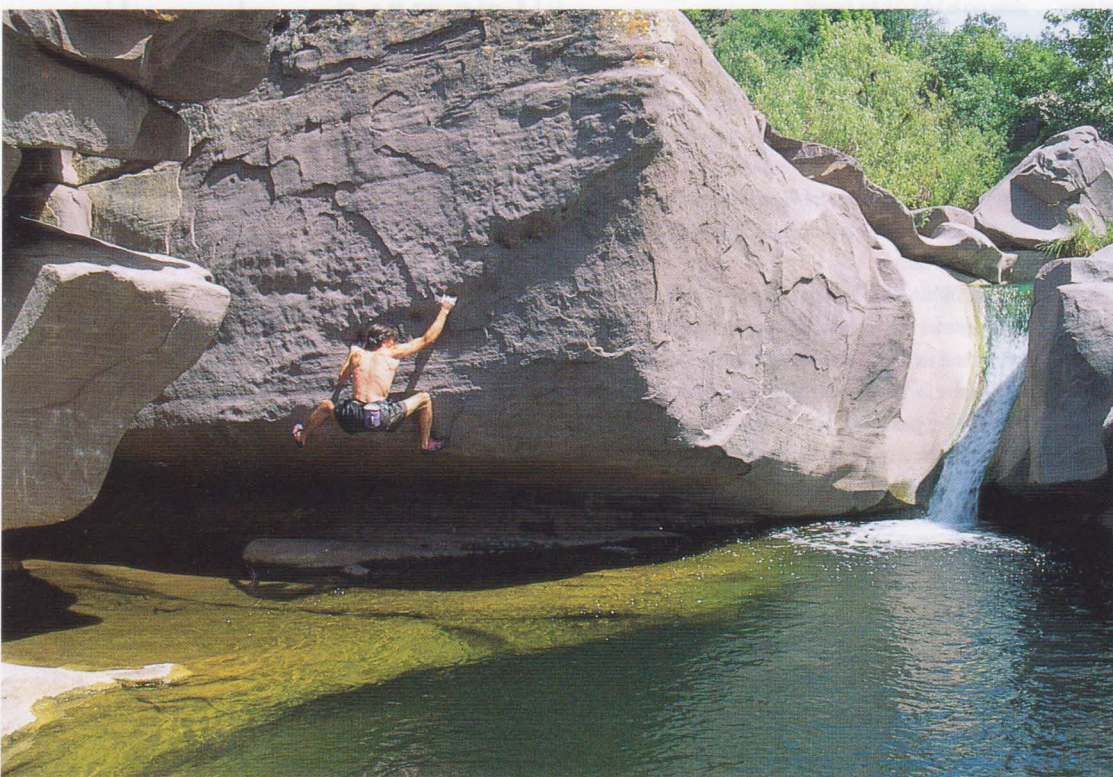


## tar creek bouldering

FILLMORE, CALIFORNIA



The author scales the Frog Route at Tar Creek's main pool.

by Wills Young

A dyed-in-the-wool lover of sheep dung, horizontal rain and bleeding fingers, I suffered in Southern California, far from the gritstone outcrops of my English homeland. I thought I would never find a rock more enjoyable to climb. What changed all that was Tar Creek — a fantastical climbing paradox of frightening problems set in idyllic surroundings.

Just an hour north of LA, near Fillmore and the Santa Clara Valley, a wedge of Los Padres National Forest features chaparral-covered wilderness, clear swimming holes and a surreal purple-hued rock. Choking the streambed of this Sespe River tributary are water-polished boulders of a unique, hard sandstone, a rock I now believe to be better than grit. The climbing demands powerful pinching, open-handed slapping on large hard-to-grip holds and pocket-pulling and crimping on positive incuts. Adding to the thrill is the abundance of alarming drop zones.

Fright, however, is part of the mystique of Tar Creek bouldering. In his famous book *Stone Crusade*, John Sherman raved about the terrifying slabs and the death-defying spills Tar Creek's pioneers took from them; Jeff Johnson enhanced the area's off-putting reputation with his well-

named stunner, The Handicapper. Landings at Tar Creek *can* be stomach-churning (the ground is littered with blocks), but I soon discovered there are superb problems with good landings too. Stand-out gems Entry Fee, Tar Baby, Troublemaker and Meateater top the list.

To the novice eye, the blank-looking rock appears unlikely to yield more than a handful of problems, having been polished to a daunting smoothness that allows climbing — but just barely. When Johnson first went down to the “swimming hole” (as his high-school buddies recommended), he recognized its potential immediately. He was first to lay hands on the glorious, unspoiled rock. Having grown up on the chiseled, rotten junk of Stoney Point,

Tar Creek was simply beyond Johnson's imagination. “I can't believe how lucky I am,” he said.

Between Johnson and Southern California boulderer Paul Anderson, they climbed most of the problems at Tar Creek, including such mega-classic technical contraries as Troublemaker and the brutal crack, Naked Ape. Dimitrios Fritz and Wills Young have also filled some gaps with No Pseudo Bravado and the Frog Route, respectively. Johnson added the big prize recently (the hardest he's done to date, he believes), with Aquaman — a totally committing powerful pull on an arête that hangs out above the deep pool. Do you like swimming?

When I first visited Tar Creek in spring of 1989, I launched myself at many enticing, but scary, problems, amped up by the sheer buzz of climbing such incredible rock. Among the first things I did was a slab problem Johnson named The Wave after its smooth curl. The epitome of Tar Creek climbing, it requires balance, technique and the level of cool necessary to surf a 10-foot overhead. There's nothing to pull down on and the ground below is a sloping nightmare. For audacity and exposure, the Frog Route is another adrenaline-pumping classic from the early days. A series of bold moves on good pockets trend up and right, across a smooth wall to finish on small

crimps above the clear pool. Tiny, sticky-toed frogs occasionally pop out of the last pocket as fingers gingerly feel out the dark little holes. Below, the water glistens, though beneath the surface lurks a malicious, submerged ledge. On the necky Shock Wave, there's no water to break a fall from the sloping mantel topout. Local advice: just don't.

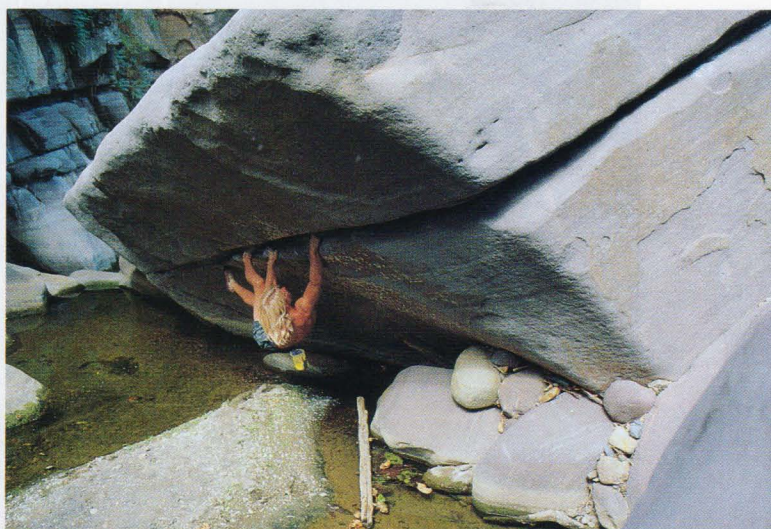
Uncommon movements are common here and make for unique climbing. Arête slapping is one of the specialties of Tar Creek, Jump Start being a real killer. From a dead hang, the right hand slaps high and hard to latch the slab arête with a wide, open-handed pinch. Topping out is the crux. If ever a hold had to be milked for all it's worth, this pinch is it. At the opposite end of the scale, the frustrating Girlie Arête (I didn't name it) has disappointed many a suitor who just can't hang on, despite palming the smooth curves with both hands.

Just as with the gritstone of England, awkward body positions and contorted footwork combine with scary landings to stymie both the strong and squeamish. Unlike grit, however, this rock is soft on the skin, it rarely rains, and sheep don't use it as a toilet.

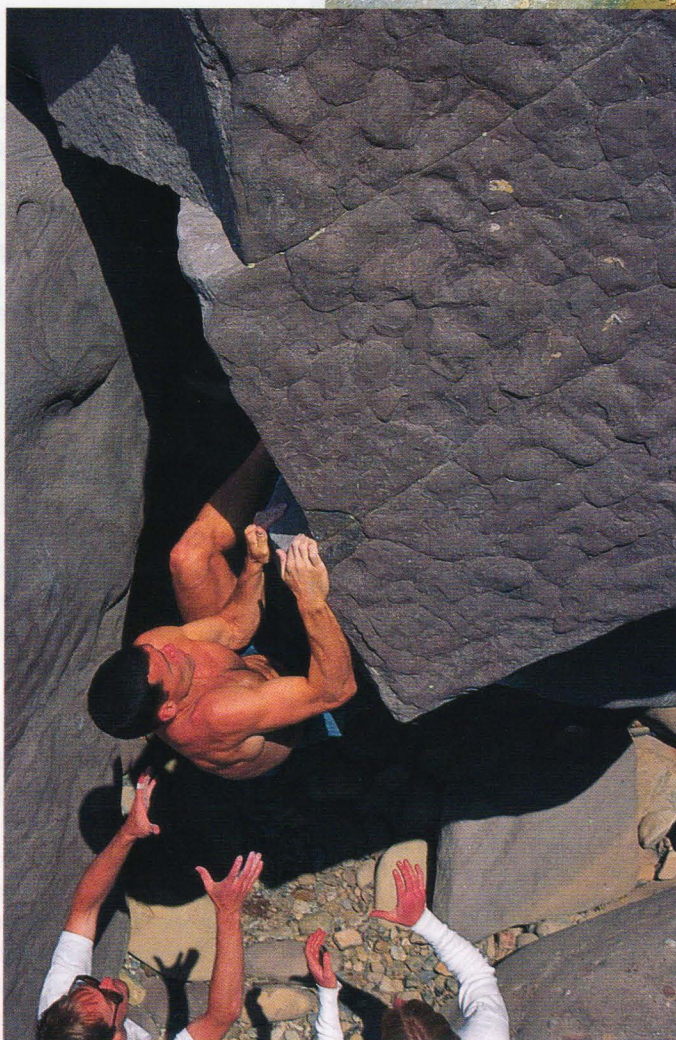
Clear running water, waterfalls, water-slides, pools to cool off in and a fair bit of shade make it all the more enticing. Some even dispense with the climbing altogether, kicking back and enjoying the pools and the sunshine.

So what exactly *is* the catch? Nothing really. All you have to do is walk/bike a couple of miles, and the approach is almost all downhill. Of course, it's a bit of a nightmare on the way back out.

**where and when** At Fillmore and the junction of highways 126 and 23, head north on A Street (straight across the intersection if you've come up Highway 23). Turn right at Goodenough Road and continue toward the hills. At the "Road Ends" sign, turn right. The road gradually worsens as it winds up the hillside. Stay on this road for three miles to Oak Flat Fire Station. Don't be tempted by the heavily used roads leading right. Continue for another mile and a half through a right hairpin that is followed by a long straight section. Look for a large



DAIMAIN GEBERT



WILLS YOUNG

At top: Jeff Johnson on the Naked Ape Traverse, Naked Ape Boulder. Above: Steve Edwards on Tar Baby.

parking area on the left.

Hike or bike up the dirt road to the left side of the parking area. It leads uphill through a gate. Follow this undulating road for one mile, then around the remains of fence; the road is now a foot trail. Stay on this road and follow it as it winds downhill to Tar Creek. Approach time: 40 minutes on foot, but cyclable to this point. Once you hit the creek, head downstream five minutes to the first boulder, 25 minutes to the last ones.

To AJP Boulder (no map shown): When the trail meets the creek, walk 200 yards downstream to the first boulder on your left.

To Map 1: These boulders are found about 10 minutes down the creek from the AJP Boulder. Map 2 begins just below Map 1, beyond scattered and rather undeveloped boulders.

To Map 3: Walk downstream from the pool area for about five minutes (longer during high water) and follow the creek around an L-bend. Continue past the obvious large boulder

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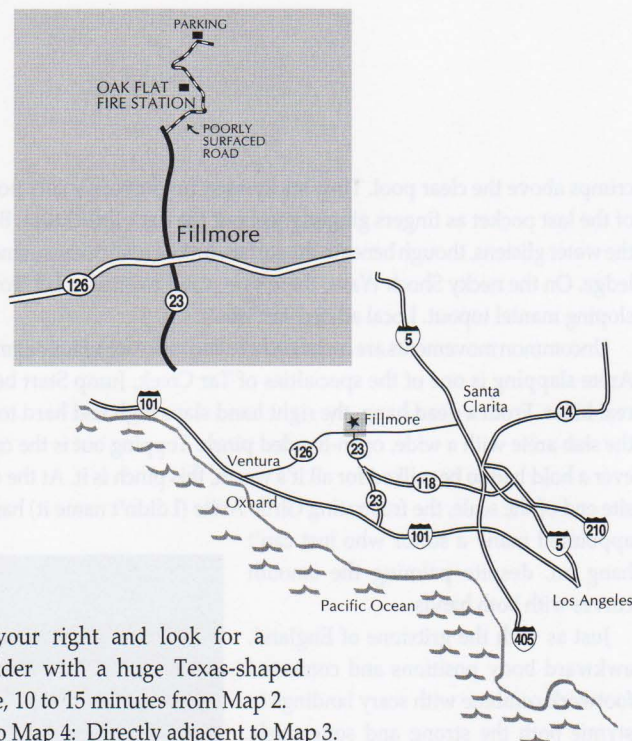
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## ROCK & ICE GUIDE • TAR CREEK



on your right and look for a boulder with a huge Texas-shaped flake, 10 to 15 minutes from Map 2.

To Map 4: Directly adjacent to Map 3.

The best season is fall, with 70° F temps, easy access and all the problems open. Mid-spring, the temperatures are good and the pools are at their most beautiful, but many problems are submerged. The water gradually subsides beginning in May. July and August are very hot. (Climb in the lower creek area if you're really tough.) Winter and early spring bring heavy rain, but cool temps mean great friction during clear spells.

**eats and sheets** The small town of Fillmore has restaurants, cafes and motels. Mexican food is the specialty. Try Margaret's Cocina on Highway 126 or Los Caporales on East Ojai. There's also a cafe (Gasoline Alley) on Santa Clara. Camping is permitted anywhere in Los Padres National Forest as long as you are a quarter mile or more from established sites. A campfire permit (from any District Forest Service office or ranger station) is required for cooking, whether on a camp stove or open fire. No open fires are allowed during dry season; keep track of local postings for up-to-date restrictions.

**guides** The climbing is so aesthetic that difficulty ratings are virtually irrelevant. Purely to enable visitors to seek out problems at a suitable level, I've given many ratings (numbers). This is not a Hueco V-scale; the numbers (1 through 7) simply give my personal impression of a problem relative to how I found the others. Try a few first and feel free to make up your own scale. High, scary problems are unrated to add spice and to leave the risk-taking entirely to you. Be careful; it's a long walk out.

Tar Creek is special. Treat it differently. Other than brushing it clean, do not alter the natural state of the rock. Whether you are utterly weak and fail on everything, or strong and crank the lot, you will receive the same respect, so long as you leave the place as you found it. Also, beware of black bears, mountain lions, rattlers, ticks, poison oak, earthquakes and flash floods.

MAP 1

**THE AJP BOULDER - THE TONGUE**

(Not shown on map.)

Every problem here is a beauty. This boulder is the first to be found, just a couple of hundred yards down the creek on the left. In spring/early summer, the base is submerged in water.

1. **AJP** (5) (Anderson-Johnson Problem) R-L traverse, topping out over tongue. Sit start, far R on boulder.
2. **Unknown** (6) R-L low traverse. As above but, at square-cut rib, avoid all upper holds to make huge span L. Use L side of tongue to grovel out onto L ledge.
3. **Kiss It** (6) L-R low traverse. Tongue and cornice below with pocket, etc. are off. Sit-start, two pockets low L side. Big span to rib; top-out around corner R.
4. **Unknown** (5) Sit-start R of center on pockets either side of rib. Up to crimp; top-out around to R.
5. **Unknown** (6) As above but AJP top-out and with all rock R of rib off.
6. **Guitar String** (7) Sit-start pockets L of rib (L in L pocket), pulling straight into rib; AJP top-out.
7. **Unknown** (4) Sit start L in low pockets. Climb up and R via pocket to AJP top-out.

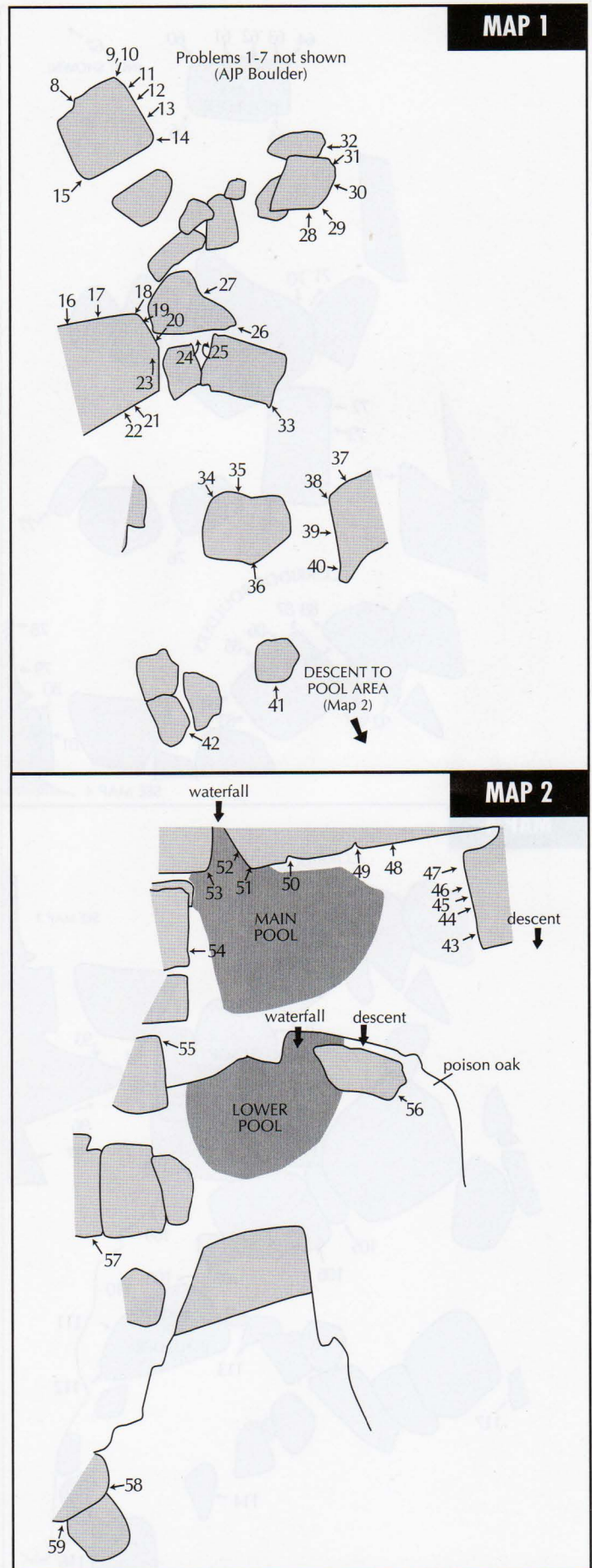
**MAP 1**

8. **Bone Bag** (2) Pockets beside tree, L to crimps, then up. Tree off.
9. **Entry Fee** (5) The scalloped arête. Crack L off.
10. **Unknown** (4) Arête to crack.
11. **Two-tone Crack** (2).
12. **Rest In Pieces Slab** (?).
13. **Driving North Crack** (4) From stand-up.
14. **Never Say Never** (5) Start low, but use undercling on slab L.
15. **Unknown** (3) Lie-start crack and hug.
16. **Life's A Beach** (1).
17. **The Wave** (?) Perhaps the most classic at the creek. Doesn't seem too hard if you stay cool, but how close are you to slipping?
18. **Off The Lip Arête** (4) from pocket in R wall. Reachy.
19. **Surf Star Dyno** (6) to pocket/crimp then arête top-out.
20. **Unknown** (6) Two hard pulls. Sit-start two micro pockets. Top-out via pair of mantels.
21. **Dynolite Gain** (5) crimps from cheat block, by jump, or from L. Straight up via dyno. From two right most crimps only, the original and (I'm told) the best: Dynamite.
22. **Serial Killer** (?) Up just left of Dynolite via side-pull. Hard.
23. **Unknown** (1) Traverse along two sides. Great warm-up.
24. **Unknown** (4) Hang the lieback.

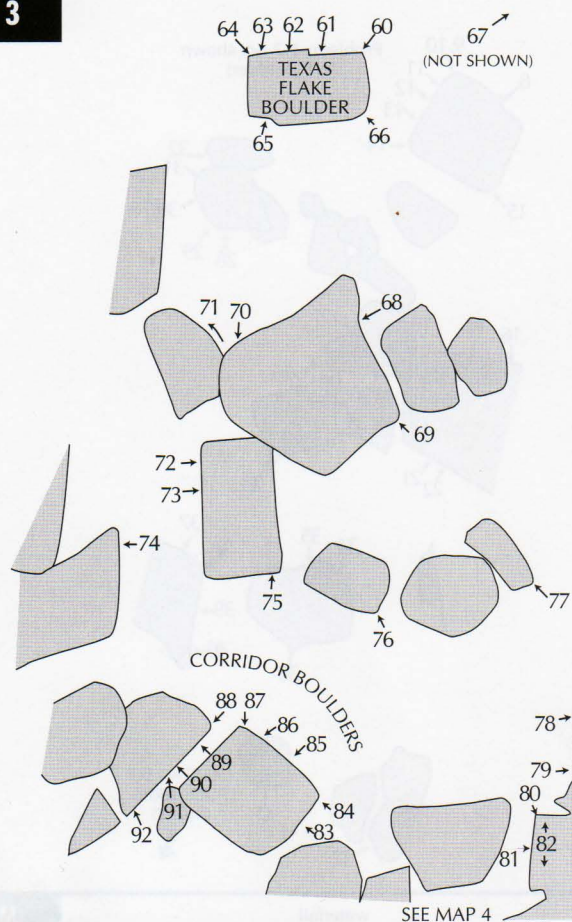
- Both feet off ground. Then top-out. More fun than you'd think.
25. **Unknown** (5) Crimps moving to top L.
  26. **Unknown** (1) Arête, topping out either left or right.
  27. **Unknown** (?) Standing jump off block to double-hand crimp. Wild!
  28. **Slap** (4) Start on small block under boulder. Go up off creaking flakes or right arête (reachy).
  29. **Unknown** (6) Sit/hang-start, pockets.
  30. **Unknown** (2) Sit/hang-start, crimp ledge.
  31. **Unknown** (5) Sit-start.
  32. **Unknown** (0) Short and easy.
  33. **Unknown** (5) Arête. Elim all but R-most liebacks on L side.
  34. **Cyclops From Slab** (?) Grab eye. Hard, long slap for top.
  35. **Wall** (?) Feels either easy or contrived.
  36. **Unknown** (5) Hang-start pockets.
  37. **Unknown** (2) Straight up from block. Hidden hold.
  38. **Unknown** (5) Arête from block. Hands on opposing side-pulls at equal height. Top-out R side.
  39. **Unknown** (3) Crimps, high-step.
  40. **Unknown** (3) Sit-start to undercling.
  41. **Unknown** (5) Sit-start, good slot.
  42. **Unknown** (3) Arête. Start both hands on face. Watch head.

**MAP 2**

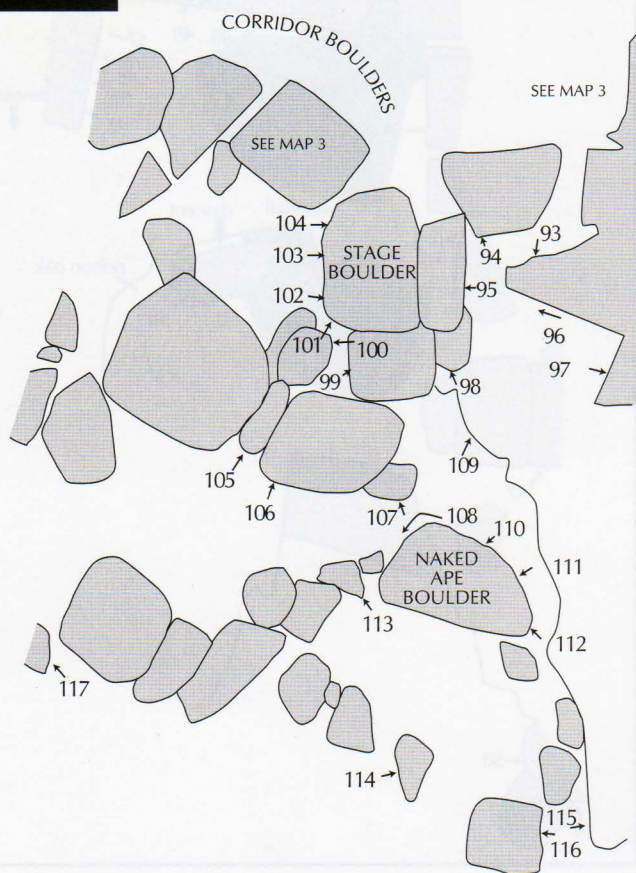
43. **Unknown** (5) L in pocket. R on down-sloping ramp. Slap to lip.
44. **Big Fish, Little Pond** (7) Start at one-finger undercling and small L lieback. Large flat hold L off. Top-out via shallow pockets.
45. **Machine Gun** (3) Start at large flat hold. (Nice dyno also possible.)
46. **Frogman** (7) Start from sit, both hands on undercling, underneath boulder. Top-out via crimps/pocket, front face.
47. **Unknown** (3) Left hand on good lieback/undercling.
48. **Anderson Roof Problem** (5) Sit-start.
49. **Unknown** (1) Open corner.
50. **Unknown** (?) Overhanging crack. Not done yet.
51. **Aquaman** (?) The big tick! Hanging arête. Lean out to pockets. Desperate top-out. Comfortable landing!
52. **Flashflood** (2) R-ward rising traverse and mantel.
53. **Frog Route** (?) During high water, may need block to gain first holds. Little chance of retreat, bad landing. View from above advised.
54. **Shock Wave** (?) Sloping top-out may need brushing. Don't fall.
55. **Locals Only** (6).
56. **Nirvana** (2).



## MAP 3



## MAP 4



**57. Pocket Change** (6) In hidden wall. Sit-start L on crimp and deep one-finger pocket. Long swing R then up. **58. Jump Start** (7) Sit-start back of low boulder or swing in from standing start, L, or jump in. Top-out upper boulder. **59. Unknown** (5) The crack, circular traverse.

### MAP 3

**60. Ring Of Fire** (4) Pull R into crack, then up. **61. Texas Flake** (1). **62. Brownsville** (4) Start R hand on R arête, L on undercling. Traverse L then up. **63. Heckler Cracked** (?) Face direct. Painful crimps. **64. Troublemaker** (7) Start as for Brownsville. Gain ledge R side of arête (tricky), then up (also tricky). **65. No Pseudo Bravado** (?) Sparse and hard. **66. Unknown** (1) Arête. **67. Unknown** (6) On creek-side wall, opposite and a little upstream from the Texas Flake Boulder. L side of small buttress. Sit to dyno. **68. A Touch Too Much** (?) Small crimps, nasty landing. Good luck. **69. Unknown** (3) Arête from high block. Low start, R hand in lieback is much harder. **70. Unknown** (?) Tough mantel. **71. Unknown** (?) L-R Sloper traverse. **72. Unknown** (5) Arête to face. Start L hand on wide rough pinch, R on crimp. Superb! As above, but sit/hang-start, L on low pinch, R on low wide pinch (6). **73. Ape Shit** (?) Gain small crimp with L. Huge span to pocket, R. **74. Unknown** (4) Dirty face, quick snatch, bad landing. **75. Unknown** (?) Hard top rope. Not been bouldered. **76. Unknown** (1) Easy but good. **77. Girlie Arête** (2). **78. Unknown** (1) Lieback. **79. Unknown** (2). Hanging crimp problem. **80. Unknown** (6) Hang from horizontal. Move L and climb arête. **81. Unknown** (?) Lock-off, heel-hook, dyno or campus problems. **82. Warm-up Traverse** As it says. **83. Pinball High** (3) Step off tiny finger holds. Nasty fall potential, hence name. **84. Unknown** (1) Slab right of Pinball. **85. Unknown** (2) Slab. **86. Unknown** (4) Slab. **87. Hustle & Strut Arête** (2) Not as bad as it looks. Apart from the landing. **88. Unknown** (3) Arête. Crack off; lieback seam on, staying L at top. **89. Lost Luggage** (6) Gain pocket from R or direct from undercling. Join Baggage Claim. Nice problem. **90. Baggage Claim** (5) L-R Rising line of crimps. **91. Unknown** (?) Face. Hard to top-out if short. Otherwise easy. **92. Unknown**

(6) Arête to ramp, from high block. Off good hold low R, high block off. Dyno up L.

### MAP 4

**93. Meateater** (5/6) Off block or with intro traverse from L. **94. Tar Baby** (3) Hanging arête. **95. Magic Johnson** (?) Heinous slab with no holds at top. **96. Unknown** (?) Traverse around corner, up Meateater, across warm-up, etc. **97. The Handcapper** (?) From bottom L up wall to arête top-out. Wow! Watch your back. Jump/swing-in also goes. **98. Unknown** (2) Typical Tar Creek mantel. **99. Tar Face** (2) Another awesome high one. **100. Unknown** (5) Cool mantel problem from sit, hands in horizontal. **101. Unknown** (?) Jump to another mantel. **102. Rain Dance** (3) Nice pockets, neat footwork. **103. Center Stage** (?) Off block. High step. Tiny L crimp, long stretch R. **104. Stage Fright** (4) Two variants. Deadly, but ultra-classic L top out, or long reach to big pocket at apex of boulder. **105. Unknown** (4) Hug, slap and stick. Large jammed boulder only. **106. Unknown** (3) Worth doing. **107. Unknown** (?) Powerful lieback. Difficulty depends on starting height of hands. **108. Naked Ape** (7) L-R crack rising traverse. Start at L-most big holds. Turn corner, continue up and top-out! **109. Unknown** (3) Not as innocuous as it looks. **110. Pull and Mantel** (4) With L hand in small dish, R under, R foot on. Or jump/reach in. **111. Unknown** (6) Can sit this one off small crimp. Hard to stick the snatch. Start two holds higher (2). **112. Unknown** (1) Another mantel. **113. Unknown** (1) Clean arête. **114. Unknown** (4) Sit-start. Harder than it looks. **115. Air Willy** (2). **116. Unknown** (5) Crack. Sit-start, R hand at back. **117. Unknown** (3) Nice pocket pull.

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