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Edge of A Dream, 5.7. Upper Tier of Ship Rock, NC. Photo by Mike Holley, www.mountainproject.com

A Five-Day Guide to Climbing in the High Country of North Carolina

North Carolina.

Not home to the giant, sweeping granite walls of Yosemite in California or the sandstone splitter cracks of Indian Creek in Utah.

Not home to the mountainous desert landscape like the backdrop of Hueco Tanks in Texas or Devil's Tower in Wyoming.

Not home to the steep overhangs of the Red River Gorge in Kentucky or the precise vertical face climbs of the New River Gorge in West Virginia.

North Carolina is not home to the premier destinations of rock climbers around the world. You probably won't find Tommy Caldwell establishing the next world's hardest multi-pitch climb anywhere in North Carolina and odds are you won't find Alex Honnold free soloing anything in the Tar Heel State. You won't see Sasha Degulian cruising up 5.14's and you probably won't find Daniel Woods establishing world-class boulder problems (if you don't know who Caldwell, Honnold, Degulian or Woods are, give their names a Google- they're... *rock-stars*).

No, you won't find the biggest names in climbing making extraordinary ascents on North Carolina's cliff faces or boulders. But tucked in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains and at the peak of Appalachian backcountry adventuring, you will find what makes North Carolina climbing every bit as exceptional as Yosemite and the other world-class destinations.

If you find yourself with a week off of work and want to spend five days on some of the best rock in the south (if not the world), then look no further than the High Country of North Carolina. The High Country is home to Watauga, Avery, and Caldwell counties and is located in the northwestern part of the state. The High

Country is home to excessively bold traditional pitches, powerful sport lines, and the best boulders east of the Mississippi. The High Country of North Carolina has something wonderful to offer to every type of climber.

Day One—Blowing Rock Boulders

BLOWING ROCK BOULDERS AREA CLASSICS

- ❖ Center 45 V3, 3.5 stars
- ❖ Flagly V10, 4 stars
- ❖ Classic Arete, v6 3 stars

Starting in the heart of the High Country, Watauga County is home to the best boulders in the state and arguably the entire south. Six miles south of county seat Boone is Blowing Rock. Even if you are primarily a rope climber, Blowing Rock has a boulder field that is a great way to begin a tour of climbing in the High Country. The **Blowing Rock Boulders** boulder field is located just two miles south of Blowing Rock on US Highway 221. Blowing Rock Boulders has boulders that range from V0 to V10 on the vermin (V) scale (V17 is the hardest bouldering grade on the V scale; V0 is perfect for beginners where V9 is for extremely advanced climbers).

Parking at Blowing Rock Boulders can be tough to come by if the area is crowded, but Blowing

Rock Boulders does not see much foot traffic. There is a pull off at the 221 Visitor's Center where cars can park. The access trail is the only trail beside the lot, so Blowing Rock Boulders is easy to find. The approach time to the first boulder from the parking lot is about 15 minutes, which is one of the longer approaches in the

Parking at BR Boulders:
According to Mountain Project, the boulder field is located at the coordinates **36.13980 N, -81.96460 W**

****There's a pull off located across the highway from Sandy Flat Baptist Church. Parking is free but limited.****

High Country. There is not a definitive guide to Blowing Rock Boulders, but there is some information of the rock climbing web site Mountain Project. The best time to visit Blowing Rock Boulders is the fall—cool, crisp air, and little chance of rain most days. This boulder field is home to some area classics including the Center 45 problem (pictured below). Blowing Rock Boulders is a great stop on a five-day tour of the High Country.



Center 45, V3. 45 Degree Wall, Blowing Rock Boulders. Photo by Nick Cornejo, www.mountainproject.com

After a good day of bouldering, there are plenty of dining options in Blowing Rock. Check out Mellow Mushroom or Town Tavern downtown. If you're looking for a place to stay, there is plenty of free camping off of the Blue Ridge Parkway, which runs parallel to 221. The best camping spot is at Julian Price Memorial Park, four miles south of Blowing Rock and is easy to access from 221.

Day Two—Little Wilson (Sport and Top-Rope Climbing)

After checking out Blowing Rock Boulders, it's time to start exploring the 221 Circuit. Known almost exclusively to locals, the 221 Circuit begins just after the Blowing Rock Boulders parking lot and continues for seventeen miles to the town of Linville in Avery County.

The 221 Circuit is comprised of hundreds of boulders and thousands of boulder problems, along with four (*yes, four*) sport and traditional crags. Instead of bouldering for two days in a row, it's time to check out **Little Wilson**. Little Wilson is the first rope-climbing crag along the 221 Circuit and is home to high quality sport lines. . Although the climbs are few in number (only 19 according to Mountain Project), they are the longest sport lines in the High Country and the best for the moderate climber. Little Wilson is ten miles south of Blowing Rock and just across the Avery County line. Parking for Little Wilson is located at the third pull off past the Avery County line.

Mountain Project contains "grades" according to the Yosemite Decimal System (YDS), which is a system that was devised by climbers in Yosemite Valley in the 1960's to tell hard climbs from easy climbs. The YDS grading for climbs range from 5.0-5.15c. Once the grades reach 5.10, the grade is assigned a letter to differentiate difficulty. For example, 5.11a and 5.11b may be similar in difficulty, while 5.11d may be significantly harder than 5.11a but not quite as difficult as 5.12a. Mountain Project also contains a "star" system, where users give a quality rating for climbs. The star system rates climbs from zero stars to four stars, which includes half-stars. Little Wilson contains climbs that range from 5.8 to the upper 5.12's, providing a good range of 5.10's and 5.11's.

LITTLE WILSON CLASSICS

- ❖ The Fin 5.9, 2.5 stars
- ❖ Climb With A 5.10b, 2.5 stars
- ❖ Tanqueray 5.11a/b, 3 stars
- ❖ The Wizard 5.12c, 3 stars

One of the main drawbacks of climbing at Little Wilson is the approach. From the parking lot, it is a forty-five minute walk to the first wall, which makes Little Wilson the longest approach in the High Country. Little Wilson sees little traffic, so if you're looking to get away from the crowds, brave a long approach, and crush classic moderates Little Wilson is the place to go.

Day Three—A Day Off

Rest day! Even Adam Ondra, the undisputed best climber in the world, takes days off. Explore the local towns. The best place to go on a rest day is downtown Boone.

Boone is the county seat of Watauga County and is the home of Appalachian State University and a historic downtown. Boone has plenty to offer in terms of shopping, food, and relaxing. Visit Mast General Store downtown if you want to

experience the small town feel of Boone. Check out

Capone's Pizza on King Street if you want to treat

yourself to a good local meal. If you need to rack up

on some climbing gear, check out Rock Dimensions

on South Depot Street. Here, you can pick up a copy of *Selected Climbs in North*

Carolina (2014), which will come in handy later on the trip. The best place to visit

for climbers, however, is Misty Mountain Threadworks.

Located just four miles southwest of downtown Boone, Misty Mountain Threadworks is a world-renown climbing business. Misty Mountain specializes in



harnesses, chalk bags, and nylon slings. Misty Mountain operates out of a remote cabin in Valley Crucis, NC. Misty is a local favorite and a favorite of climbers from all over the world. The cabin is open from 8-5 on weekdays and often gives tours to visitors. Misty is a must-visit business in the High Country.

Day Four—The Dump (Sport and Top-Rope Climbing)

The Dump.

Unfortunately named, the Dump offers the most and best sport climbs for

THE DUMP CLASSICS

- ❖ Homegrown 5.10a, 3 stars
- ❖ Vermin 5.10b, 2 stars
- ❖ Warpin Endorphin 5.11c, 4 stars
- ❖ Tiers for Allah 5.13a, 4 stars

beginning, moderate, and advanced climbers. The

parking lot for the Dump is located roughly 300

yards south of the parking spot for Little Wilson.

After parking, cross 221 and walk less than 100

yards up a trail to the first wall. The Dump is famous

in the area for its run-outs (space between points of protection) on sport climbs.

The Dump is home to some of the best classics in the area, with almost all of the

climbs being of the slab variety. The quartzite rock is quite gritty and hand and foot

holds are often small. The Dump is a great crag for technical climbers. The rock stays

primarily dry and sees a lot of sun, but this also means it sees a lot of traffic,

especially since it is so easy to access.



Orrin Warwick top-rope climbing the classic 5.10a slab route, Homegrown. Photo by Tyler Warwick

Day Five—Ship Rock (Single and Multiple pitch Traditional Climbing)

On your final day in the High Country, its time for the mac-daddy of the area—**Ship Rock**.

Ship Rock is the peak of the High Country, both geologically and for climbing. Ship is the only multi-pitch climbing spot in the High Country and is exclusively



Orrin Warwick hangs out in the back of a truck before the approach to Ship Rock. Photo by Tyler Warwick

traditional climbing. Ship is home to roughly forty climbs, ranging from 5.7 to 5.12c in grades according to Mountain Project. To get to Ship Rock, head south from Blowing Rock on the Blue Ridge Parkway and park

at the Rough Ridge overlook on which is located near mile marker 302.

Walk about a half-mile south down the Parkway and cut up through the woods just after a bridge. Once you arrive at the entrance, it's time

to decide what to climb.

UPPER TIER CLASSICS

- ❖ Edge of a Dream 5.7, 3 stars
- ❖ Lost At Sea 5.8, 3 stars
- ❖ Maiden Voyage 5.9, 3 stars

Ship Rock has a total of four different areas: the Better Late Than Never Wall, Lower Tier, Main Tier, and Upper Tier. If you only choose to spend one day at Ship Rock, start in the Upper Tier and work your way down to the Main Tier. The Upper Tier provides the

best view of the High Country, looming high over the Parkway. The climbs at the Upper Tier are for well suited for the moderate trad leader and a great warm-up for

the advanced trad climber. After knocking out the Upper Tier classics, it's time to head to the Main Tier for some of the best climbing in the whole state.

The first climb to check out on the Main Tier is Borrowed Time, 5.9. Borrowed Time was the first climb established at Ship Rock. Borrowed Time is a beautiful lie-back crack climb and is the perfect start to the Main Tier. After that, then it's time to crank into what the High Country is famous for- bold multi-pitch traditional climbing.

The multi-pitch climb to check out is Board Walk. Board Walk is an exposed two pitch 5.8 that towers over the High Country.

MAIN TIER CLASSICS

- ❖ Borrowed Time 5.9, 3 stars
- ❖ Boardwalk 5.8, 3.5 stars
- ❖ Airlie Gardens 5.9, 3.5 stars
- ❖ Linn Cove Lullaby 5.10a, 3.5 stars
- ❖ Welcome to Watauga 5.11a, 3.5 stars
- ❖ BOG Man 5.11a, 3.5 stars
- ❖ The Broach, 5.11d 4 stars

Ship Rock is full of beautiful climbs and beautiful views. It is far and away the best place to climb in the High Country. A more detailed guide exists in Harrison Shull and Yon Lambert's oft-used *Selected Climbs in North Carolina (2014)*. Ship is on the only crag listed in *Selected Climbs*, which is a nod by the professionals to this being the pinnacle of climbing in the High Country.

Rainy Day Options

If you encounter bad weather in the High Country (which is fairly common) during your five-day tour, there is a good local gym option. Center 45, named after the classic V3 boulder problem Center 45 and is located off of Highway 421 South on Den Mac Drive, is a bouldering gym and fitness studio. The bouldering routes, set by

the staff, are world class. Center 45 is open from 2-8 on Monday's and 10-8 on Tuesday's through Sunday's and is \$14 for a day pass.

Make The Trip

Climbing in the High Country is unique and is worth more than one visit. You could spend five straight days at every individual crag and not get tired of the climbing. So rack your cams, double check your quick draws, stuff your crash pads in the back of the car, and make the trip to the High Country of North Carolina—it's as good as good gets.