

## **Mount Whitney, CA, 14,497 ft. – September 23, 2011, HP #12: East Buttress**

“The Matts” and I left Utah County around 8:00 p.m. on September 21, arriving in Las Vegas NV five hours later. The next morning, we were on the road by 9:00 a.m., heading west toward Pahrump NV and into Death Valley. Passing through Death Valley the road dipped as low as 190-feet below sea level, and the temperature was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

It was noon when we arrived in Lone Pine CA. Our first stop was the Ranger Station where we picked up our backcountry permits and rented a couple of bear proof canisters. Next, we stopped at a pizza joint and had lunch. After lunch we drove the 13 miles from 3,727-foot-high Lone Pine to 8,365-foot-high Whitney Portal.

By 2:30 p.m., we had our gear and backpacks organized and had started hiking on the main Mount Whitney trail. Within a mile or so we left the main trail, where it crosses the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek and headed up a wooded slope into a willow-choked valley, roughly following the creek. After the second creek crossing, we arrived at the base of the Ebersbacher Ledges. Traversing the ledges involved some third class scrambling where a slip could be fatal. Once over the ledges we reached Lower Boy Scout Lake at an elevation of 10,300 feet, having walked approximately two and a half miles. We crossed the creek and traversed around the lake on its left (south) side. Soon thereafter we were climbing over talus, and eventually crossed the creek again where it runs over some granite slabs. By 6:00 p.m. we had found a camp spot near 11,300-foot Upper Boy Scout Lake. We managed to get our tents set up before the sunset. For dinner I ate a freeze-dried dinner called “Pasta Primavera” which was surprisingly tasty.

The next morning, September 23, we left camp early just after 5:00 a.m. heading toward Iceberg Lake at the base of Mount Whitney’s East Buttress. Iceberg Lake is approximately a mile and a quarter east of Upper Boy Scout Lake and over 1,200 vertical feet higher. The sun was fully up when we reached it at 6:30 a.m. At the lake we stocked up on water, then scrambled up a 1,000 vertical feet of talus and third-class terrain to a notch below the First Tower, where the roped climbing of the East Buttress would begin.

The first two pitches have the hardest ratings of the climb at 5.8 and went straight up to the top of the Second Tower. They required about an hour and a quarter to climb. Matthew Long led the first pitch, and Matthew Jespersen led the second pitch. Although we started out before another group, the duo caught up to us at the top of the first pitch.

The third pitch is where things got difficult. We had the option at this point to go over a short arête rated 5.7 or to drop down a big step to a ramp rated 5.6. With speed in mind, and hoping to pull ahead of the other party, we decided on the ramp. We failed to notice the ramp was spotted in snow and ice due to its northern aspect. Matthew Long led this pitch masterfully avoiding most of the snow and ice. As I followed, my climbing shoes were soon covered in

snow. This was a bit nerve rattling, especially when my now wet shoes failed to grip even after smearing them on the rocks. Arriving at the belay ledge at the base of a prominent right-facing corner was a great relief, and my shoes eventually dried out. The other party used the arête option converging at the same belay station. They informed us their line was easier climbing, but limited protection gave it the higher difficulty rating.



It was after 10:00 a.m. when we began the fourth pitch, led by Matthew Jespersion. He ran the rope almost completely out on this 5.6 step like section known as the "red corner". Matthew Long led the next pitch which took us up to a large ledge just under the "peewee" block.

The sixth pitch which runs along the right-hand side of the peewee block was led by Matthew Jespersion, and the three of us topped out on that by noon. All this time

there was one other party in the lead ahead of all of us. We referred to one of the two members of the front-running party as the "white guy" – as he was dressed in white. Believe it or not his partner was dressed in black! Reaching the top of the peewee block, we and the two other groups overlapped momentarily, with the "white guy" group soon pulling ahead again.

Keeping with leads swinging between "The Matts", Matthew Long lead the seventh pitch. He chose a flake saying "it was too good to pass up" even though he worried it might be challenging for me to follow given my limited alpine rock-climbing experience. Fortunately, I climbed it without incident.

We ran into a little bit of trouble on the eighth pitch when we decided not to wait for the climbers in front of us to finish the pitch. Matthew Jespersion attempted a variation only to run into a difficult ceiling causing him to be lowered back to the belay station. It was now around 1:00 p.m., the other climbers were gone, and we were able to climb the standard pitch they had used. Matthew Long also led this one which looked relatively easy but proved to be challenging as we were tired and cold.

At the top of the eighth pitch, I put in one more piece of protection, climbed up a large boulder and unroped followed by the "The Matts". At this point I decided to trade my "cruel shoes" for my boots, understanding the remaining 300 vertical feet to be mostly class three climbing. As I did so, my partners kept moving and I soon lost sight of them.

As I scrambled up, the terrain turned out to be more challenging than anticipated. Eventually I noticed Matthew Long and angled towards him as he again disappeared. About 30 feet below the summit, I encountered a sheer 10-foot wall which I dared not climb unroped. I looked for an easier alternative only to come up short. I had just decided to sit down and eat my lunch before

trying to work my way down to easier terrain, when I heard Matthew Long calling out to me. I asked him to get a rope and drop it down to me. With the protection of the rope, I was able to climb the roadblock and finish the scramble to the 14,497-foot peak. The time was three o'clock. There was no site of the other two climbing parties, and amazingly no hikers were present either. We had the roof-top of California to ourselves!

We relaxed inside the summit hut erected in 1909. After forty-five minutes we located the Mountaineers route, and started down it. We found it coated in ice which we were not prepared for being without crampons and axes. With careful route finding, sticking to the fourth-class boulders on the left side, we were able to negotiate our way around most of the slick spots. Eventually we crossed over on a sugary snow section and continued down the right side. Just above the saddle where the route turns right and heads down to the west, we were forced to down climb a fifth-class section about 20-feet high, that had limited hand holds and spots of ice. It was quite unsettling, especially after all we had been through up to that point. Fortunately, we all made it down without incident and continued down the "never ending" west aspect couloir of the Mountaineers Route reaching Iceberg Lake by 6:00 p.m. Within an hour we were back at our camp at Upper Boy Scout Lake. Fourteen hours of hiking, climbing, and scrambling were now behind us!

September 24, we woke up to intermittent hail intermingled with sunshine and rain. Enjoying and needing the rest, we forfeited our plan to scramble up Mount Russell. By 11:30 a.m. in steady hail we headed down. As we headed down the hail soon stopped, and the sun came out. At the lower lake I removed my jacket and paused to look back noticing the peak of Mount Whitney above the lakes eastern wall, it looked a long ways away!

At the Ebersbacher Ledges we got off track by following a lone hiker in an orange hat. We soon discovered our error and notified the hiker as well. Once we got down the ledges and across the creek, we stopped for a drink. Looking back up we noticed the hiker had ignored our warning and was in potential danger. He was way off course and without his backpack. I whistled at him, caught his attention, and we were able to yell directions to him, allowing him to get off the ledges. I hiked up meeting him just a few yards past the creek crossing. He claimed to be fine but seemed uneasy. I asked about his pack and he said it had fallen off the cliff when he tried to lower it down. After confirming a second time that he did not need our help, we continued down arriving at our car in less than three hours.

Following a late lunch at the Lone Pine pizzeria, we returned the bear canisters and drove back through Death Valley to Las Vegas. Sunday morning, we were up at 5:15 a.m., allowing us to return to Utah County in the early afternoon. I felt very fortunate to have two generous friends willing to take a rookie rock climber on such a remarkable, unforgettable adventure.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/DErSibTMDvKgSCKR7>