

# Up Rope

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## NEWS OF THE P.A.T.C. MOUNTAINEERING SECTION



By Dusty Wissmath

Dusty Wissmath is a former two-term Mountaineering Section chairman and, when he's not out climbing or patrolling the local ski slopes, he is the regional coordinator for the Access Fund. With this edition of Up Rope, Dusty begins a new column focusing on local access issues and news.

### Current closings

**Crescent Rocks.** Tired of all the trash present at and near Crescent Rocks, the local landowners have asked, and MCI has agreed, to close the road leading up to the fenced-off tower site. That also means no more parking at the beginning of the road. Mountain Trails in Winchester and the Access Fund strongly recommend that we not climb at Crescent Rocks until the Fund can initiate a dialogue with the local homeowners' association.

**Caudey's Castle.** Mr. Johnson, who has been very tolerant of climbers in the past, is now fed up with the trash left by partying groups (and climbers) and has said

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**Jim Southward on the way up the north side of Aconcagua, on the Falso de Los Polacos.**

# PATC MS Expedition '95:

story and photos by Jim Southward



## Aconcagua Part II . . .

**F**rom November 25 to December 18 of last year, I led an expedition to climb Aconcagua.

Immediately upon return to the United States, I moved the family to California and I started graduate school and as a result didn't get to tell the story to many of you before now.

Our expedition consisted of seven climbers, from all over the United States: Peter Hsi (Colorado Springs, CO), Lerre Solsvig (Littleton, CO), Scott Stanton (Chicago, IL), Henri Bartholomot (Bethesda, MD), John Baker (Oak Harbor, WA), Bill Fike (Landers, WY), and myself.

### Getting to Argentina

Our group rendezvoused at the Miami airport, where several of the members met for the first time. After two days traveling and waiting in airports, we arrived in the beautiful

city of Mendoza, Argentina; with all of our equipment, to our surprise. We flew on LADECO, a first rate Chilean airline operating new Boeing 757 equipment. By the way, LADECO provided us better service than I have received on most US carriers. Two days were spent in Mendoza recovering from jet lag, loading up on wonderful Argentine beef, drinking excellent local wine, and of course seeing to all the last-minute expedition preparations. We met Fernando Grajales of Aconcagua Expeditions & Trekking whom we hired to provide pack mule service to help get our 1,050 pounds of climbing equipment to base camp. Our game plan was to approach the mountain through the Vacas and Relinchos River valleys then climb to the summit via the Polish Glacier Direct route. As planned this was a 17-day trip, including four extra days.

### Approach to Base Camp

From Mendoza, we hired a private bus called a Komby to drive us up the Trans-Andean highway to the trail-head at Punta de Incas. During the winter season, Punta de Incas serves as a popular ski station, but caters to climbers in the off-season. Punta de Incas is a very scenic spot featuring an Alpine Ski lodge, hot springs and a natural bridge across the Rio Mendoza.

We spent the night in the lodge and started out on our adventure the next morning. Our muleteer and six mules, laden with our gear, got an early start out of Punta de Incas and headed for the 13,780 foot base camp at Plaza Argentina. The mules were amazingly fast traveling over the rocky trails and made the 20-mile trip to base camp in only 1-and-1/2 days. Our schedule allowed four days to arrive at base camp, which we used to allow proper

acclimatization. Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) can be deadly and was a major concern when we developed our schedule. All serious trouble with AMS was averted through the use of a conservative schedule which had us gaining no more than 1,500 feet per day, measured at our sleeping altitude.

The hike to base camp took us through grand landscapes that are beyond description, pure rugged beauty. Our route required us to make two crossings of the Vacas river. Normally, these rivers are crossed on horseback due to the deep water and swift current, but lucky for us this last winter season had snowfall levels much below normal, resulting in below normal spring runoff. Remember that in the southern hemisphere, December is the spring season. The relative low water levels allowed us to cross on foot, but it was still pretty exciting... and cold. During the trip in, we had the rare treat of seeing several Guanacos, which are wild relatives of the llama. These creatures exist only in the most wild and remote regions of the Andes and are seldom sighted.

## **Base Camp to High Camp**

Base camp was a bleak and cold place; situated on a rock covered glacier at the 13,780 foot level. It took about an hour to locate several natural pools on the surface of the glacier which would serve as our water source. We spent two nights at base camp to rest, acclimate and prepare the loads for carries to higher camps. Four grueling days were spent carrying loads and establishing successively-higher camps on the mountain.

Each camp required two carries of gear per person. One of our members suffering from the altitude and fatigue turned back from our 17,650 ft intermediate camp on the Ameghino Col.

Finally on December 7th we established our high camp at the base of the Polish Glacier at 19,200 ft, 5,500 ft above base camp. We arrived just before the weather started to close in, the wind was picking up causing the chill factor to drop well below zero. Wind was a critical factor at high camp. It required our tents to be heavily

secured with double the normal guidelines. I actually slept with ear plugs because of the noise from the wind beating at the tent. When I developed the original schedule I built in four extra days for weather or emergencies. And as it turned out, we needed all four extra days at high camp; we spent a total of six nights camped above 19,000 ft waiting for an adequate weather window. High Camp and Summit Bid.

The weather was not our friend on this trip. The first two days at high camp were spent pinned down in our tents because of blizzard conditions. We were now becoming concerned about the avalanche potential on the Polish Direct. Being on the leeward side of the storm, a cornice was also developing on the summit ridge. The left side of the glacier was not as steep and appeared to be less critical, so on the fourth morning we decided to make an attempt on the regular Polish route vice the Direct.

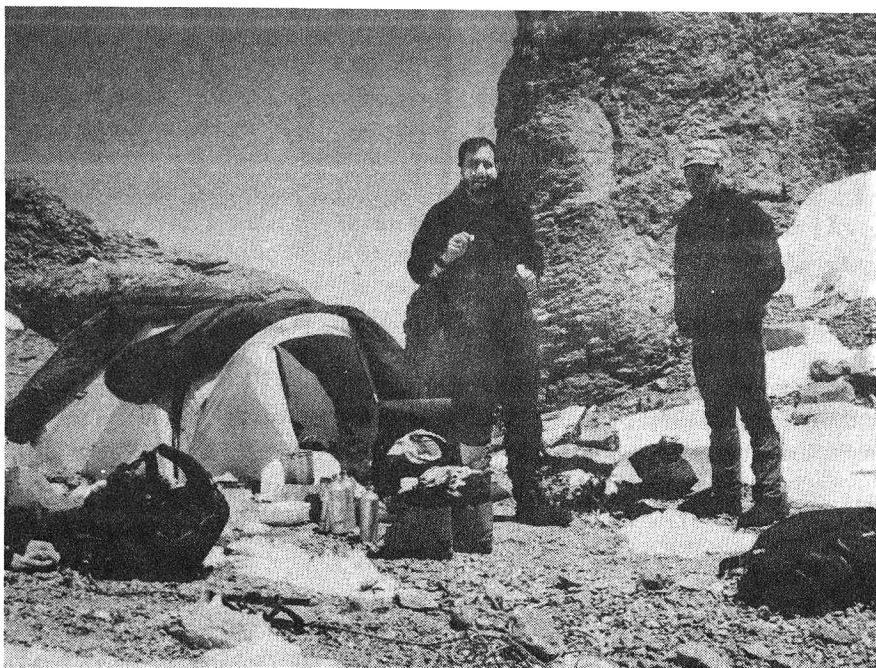
An alpine start was made at 0230 to allow us to get off the summit before noon and hopefully before the afternoon winds started to

**Independencia Hut  
(ruins) just above  
junction of Falso  
de Los Polacos  
and Normal  
routes.**

**From left to right:  
Jim Southward  
Bill Fike, John  
Baker and Scott  
Stanton.**

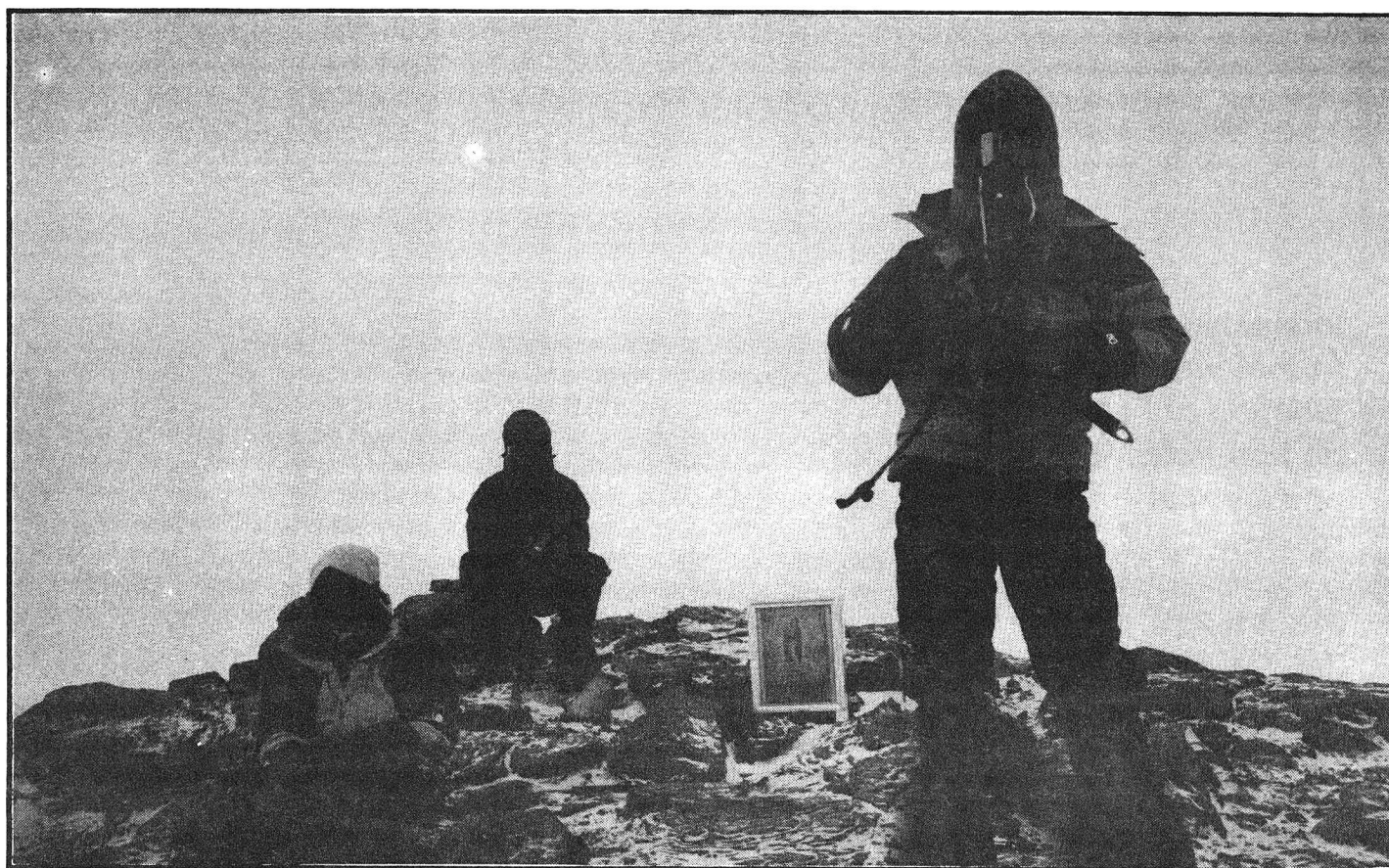






**High Camp- Bill Fike (left) and John Baker (right).**

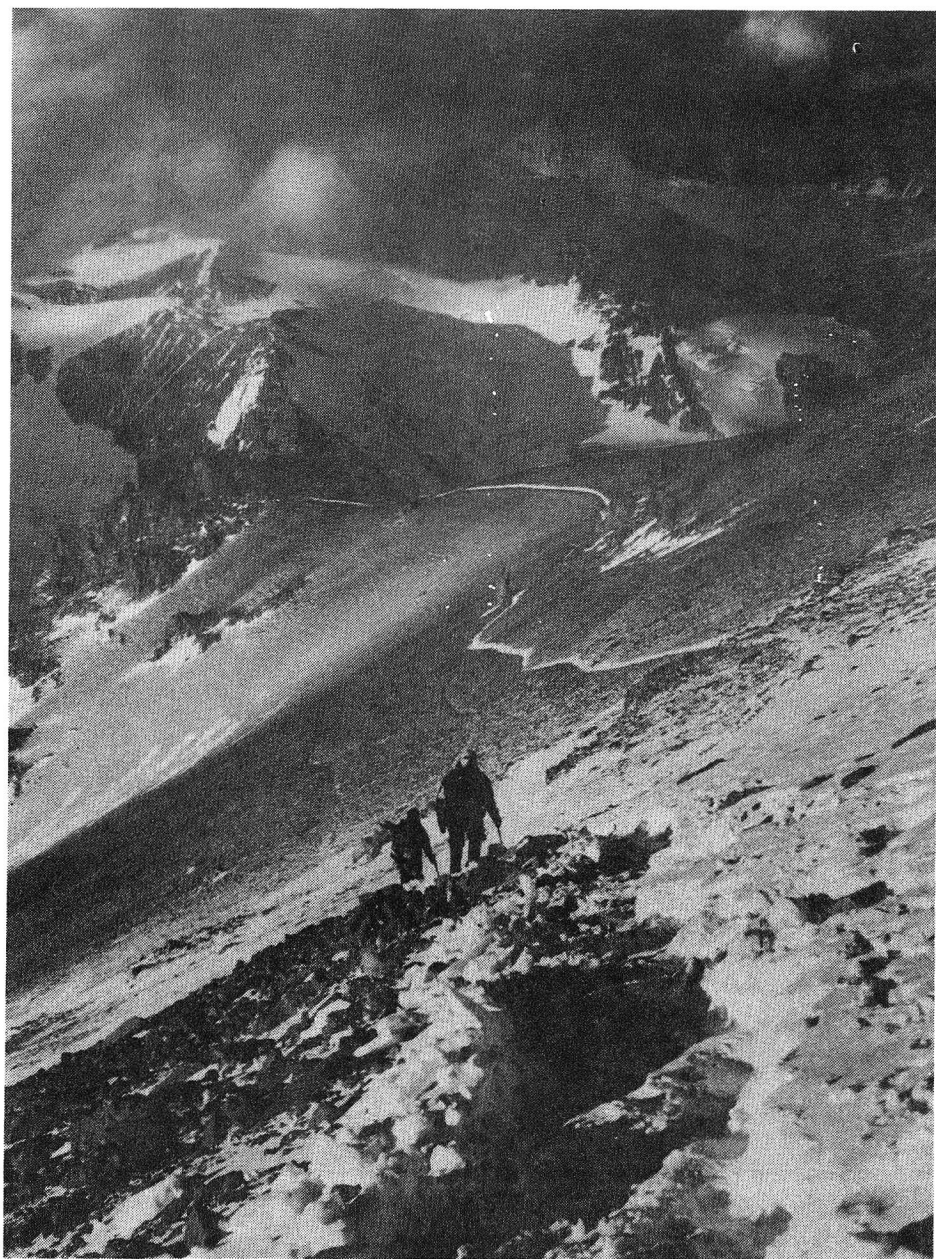
pick up. A successful summit bid was not to be that night. The below-normal winter snow levels that had been our friend during the river crossing had now come back to haunt us. The condition of the glaciers were very bad. The lower glacier was covered with four-foot tall, wind-sculpted Penitentes and small crevasses, which were now covered with new snow and hard to detect. What should have taken one hour to climb took three. To make a long story short, we turned back just before sunrise. Our next opportunity to climb the mountain did not occur until the last day, just as we were running out of both food and time. We decided to attempt the mountain via the Falso de los Polacos route, which traverses the Polish and Vacas glaciers and intercepts the Normal route at the ruins of the Independencia Hut.



**Summit of Aconcagua: 22,841 feet, 12/11/95 ~5PM  
Left to right: Scott Stanton, John Baker and Jim Southward.**



**Descending  
the northwest  
ridge is John  
Baker (left) and  
Scott Stanton  
(right).**



**T**his route is much less committing and, other than requiring crampons, is essentially non-technical. We delayed our start until 0700 because of cold and windy conditions. I was almost forced to turn back several times because of frostbite, as I felt my feet were starting to freeze. The traverse and climb to the summit took us nine grueling hours over some of the most frustrating terrain known to man. Climbing above 20,000 ft is hard work; three steps were followed by 15 breaths, and so on.

One of the six climbers turned back at 22,000 ft because of the valid concern for schedule; it was getting late and to continue was committing to a night descent. The remaining climbers pressed on, but the weather was also deteriorating rapidly.

As we approached the summit ridge we were experiencing whiteout conditions. Somehow we found the summit in the poor visibility. We had made it to the top. Unfortunately we had come all this way and didn't even get a view! Our stay on the summit was a short one. It was getting late, it was snowing, it was cold, and we were dizzy from the lack of oxygen. We started down and finally made it back to camp at midnight... a challenging 17-hour day on the mountain.

The next two days were spent returning to civilization. After three weeks on the expedition, a hot shower and steak dinner were very welcome.

Come visit us in Monterey and I'll give you the slide show.



## Post Climb Group Photo:

**Back row (left to right): Lerre Solsuig, Senor Andreas, Jim Southward (trip leader), John Baker, Henri Bartholomot.**

**Front row (left to right): Scott Stanton, Bill Fike, Peter Hsi.**

## Up Rope Beta Box:

### ACONCAGUA Background and History

Aconcagua rises above all other peaks in the South American Andes. At 22,841 feet, it is not only the highest peak in South America, but is the highest point in both the southern and western hemispheres. The mountain lies in western Argentina near the border of Chile. The nearest major city is Santiago, Chile about 100 miles to the southwest. Since Aconcagua is one of the Seven Summits, it is on many a climbers to-do list.

The mountain has had an interesting history. Inca Indians were perhaps the first people to venture onto the mountain. An ancient Inca mummy, preserved by the cold dry air, was once found at the 17,060 ft level. In 1832, Charles Darwin noted the dominance of Aconcagua while crossing the Andes during a journey ashore on the voyage of the Beagle. The summit of Aconcagua was first reached on January 14, 1897 by the Swiss climber Matthias Zurbriggen. This was a remarkable feat considering the difficulties of the approach and the poor equipment available at that time.



# MR. SAFE-T RETURNS!!!

## MS Trip report: Riegelsville

**Yes, there is a climbing life after becoming a father! Nicholas is a strapping seven-month old now and is working on the mantle move to exit the "crib route" in his room.**

First, I want to cover a few quick items about ice climbing. Yes, this new father has finally purchased some ice-climbing gear and is returning to the frozen faces for the first time since college. The main impetus for this is a planned trip to the Black Ice Couloir on the Grand Teton this summer.

In February, John Yanson and I met up with MS members Jeanette Helfrich and Greg Christopulos to climb at the Riegelsville/Kintnersville gulleys above the Delaware River. The whole experience, though not alpine, was very wintry and impressive. The ice was fat (see I'm picking up the lingo already) and many gullies were in fine condition.

Greg swore we were going up Dead Deer Gully but as we were ascending a thin, 30-foot vertical ice step he started mumbling about Dead Deer didn't have anything like this! I was glad John was leading my rope. We climbed up into the upper part of the gully and topoped the final headwall after John made a fine lead up it. He did pause long enough at the crux for me to realize just how cold belaying is in the winter!

The other memorable event on the trip harkens back to safety issues. I had borrowed a pair a Cassin crampons from John Raynor that had structural plastic connecting metal-crampon points. I raised my eyebrows at structural plastic for winter climbing gear and much to my dismay at the end of the day I was kicking into an ice block and the crampon broke in half (sorry John). I was finished for the day, but it made the rappels down the ice a little more difficult. On a real alpine ice route, the consequences would have been a lot more dire.

The caveat here is: Know your gear and test it where you can't get into too much trouble!

All in all, a great day finishing with dinner at the restaurant in Kintnersville. Ice climbing is a blast and I look forward to freezing my butt again next winter.

On to other topics.

## Mr. Safe-T's TOPROPING TOP-5 LIST

Just in time for spring climbing, I thought I'd review my top-5 list of most important things to remember about top roping.

**5. Anchors**—You should use at least 2—preferably 3—bomber anchors to set up a toprope. Redundancy in your protection system is very important. Do not rely on a single anchor or single piece of gear. Also, the anchors should be spaced apart so that a pendulum fall will not rub the anchor lines against the edge of the cliff.

**4. Force of pull**—Evaluate the forces of the pull should a fall occur. Be sure that: the pull on the belayer does not launch him or her into the cliff, the pull on the anchors does not cause a pendulum fall that could slice the anchor lines, and any pendulum swing does not land the climber some place undesirable (like an inside corner or on another climber).

**3. Rope**—Using your old lead rope for top roping is a fine idea as long as it is still in good shape. Check for any lumps or soft spots in the mantle (inside of kernmantle rope) and look for any major fraying or cuts in the sheath (kern). If the rope is over 5 years old, don't use it in any event. It's time to retire it. I recommend cutting retired ropes into 4 pieces (for use in strapping objects to the car) to ensure you can't use it for climbing.

**2. Harness**—Check yours and your partner's harness buckles. I have seen many climbers fail to double back the webbing through the buckle. It is surprisingly easy to do, especially if you are yakking with the other hardbodies at the gym. Try not to pause while putting the harness on, just finish the threading all at once.

**1. Tie-in Knot**—If you are going to bother using a rope for protection, make sure you are tied into it properly! I recommend a rethreaded figure-eight. Check your partner's knot (on the sly if your partner is an experienced climber, no need to miff your belayer).

One final note. There is an excellent article in the latest Climbing (#159) magazine about self-rescue for an injured leader. Check it out.

—Mr. Safe-T (aka Alex Tait)

My first PATC/MS trip:

# OLD RAG

~by Alexandra Christopulos

Last June, I went on a PATC trip to Old Rag with Rick Dotson (the trip leader), my Dad (Greg Christopulos) and Dave Coffey. We left Oakton at 7a.m. and got to Old Rag before 9a.m. My Dad has a heavy foot.

The hike was strenuous. My pack got heavy. I carried a lot of water because it was such a hot, sunny day. Then I got my Dad to carry my pack for a while. As usual, my Dad promised me a giant 7-Eleven Slurpee if I didn't whine when I got tired.

When we got to the top, we looked for a place to climb, but there were no good climbs along the trail. We went off the trail and found two anchors bolted to a rock. Rick tied two ropes together and rappelled down.

This was the first time I had ever rappelled. When it was my turn, I clipped onto one rope with my SRC (Single Rope Controller) and my Dad gave me a top belay with the other rope. I went over two big overhangs—on one of them I scraped my shin.

When I got to the "bottom," I found out that we were really standing on a big pillar instead of on a boulder near the ground. The bushes around the boulder turned out to be tree tops.

When I got on the pillar, I started to get scared because I thought I might slip off and hit the ground with a loud thud. Then my Dad came down and hooked me to an anchor.

As I watched my Dad and his friends climb, I scrambled over to the tree-covered ridge next to the top of the pillar. I sat in the shade, listening to my cassette player or playing with my Nintendo. Rick led a climb that Dave and my Dad followed. After that, I did two short climbs on a top rope.

After a while, we pulled the ropes down and planned to hike out, but there was no easy way out except for a climb through a cave. We couldn't find a trail because the brambles and bushes were everywhere.

When we finally hauled the packs up and out of the cave, we had to traverse a large boulder. We rigged a short top rope on one side of the traverse for Rick, who was first across. Then, the rest of us traversed across on a belay. In the middle of the traverse, I was very scared when I looked down and my feet felt like they were slipping on the lichen. My Dad and Rick pulled me across on a really tight belay, while Dave belayed from the other end. When we got to the top and out of all this mess, I felt so good.

We had spent more time bushwhacking out than we had climbing. It was about 4p.m. when we started to hike out on the Old Rag Ridge trail.

It felt good to finally sit in the back seat of the car and rest my legs. When we got to town, we ate at Wendy's, and I'm glad I got the "all-you-can-eat" special. Then we drove home, but first we stopped for a big Slurpee, because I hadn't whined. It was 11p.m. by the time we got to Oakton.

P.S.—Next time I go on a PATC/MS trip, I want to go to Seneca or The Gunks so I don't have to hike so far or bushwhack all day.

**Editor's note:** Alexandra is 10 years old and sent us her story last year, not long after the trip. Unfortunately, we had misplaced it until recently. We apologize for not printing it earlier and look forward to possibly receiving more stories this year.



Continued from page 1

enough is enough. Another problem for the owner is that some climbers have been putting up sport routes on the rock. Please do not climb at Caudey's Castle until further notice.

## On the danger list

**Franklin Rocks.** The complaints are starting to mount about the increased number of climbers showing up and leaving lots of trash. Right now it's just some complaints, but consider this a warning. If we don't act now to foster good will and keep the area clean, we could lose access here, too.

## HELP US PRESERVE ACCESS

The function of the Access Fund is to address issues affecting local climbers. Dusty is trying to organize local climbers interested in and committed to furthering local access issues; the intent is create a local voice that can speak out on access. Among the current projects is to build a new kiosk at Carderock. If you have any questions or information concerning local access, please give Dusty a call at: (703) 729-2034.



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