



Kris Fiore at the thundercling crux on *Fire in the Hole* (5.12a; FA: May 2019), Bolton Dome, Vermont.

# Bolton Dome, Vermont

## and the State's New Schist Golden Age

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL PRONZATO

**T**hrashing through nettles, sneaking through maple trees, and walking on carpets of moss, Travis Peckham and friends hiked behind the Fernwood Manor trailer park in Bolton, Vermont. Moving stealthily, Peckham traversed a lichen-covered ramp to access the top of the Bolton Dome, a schist cliff 20 miles east of Burlington. It was 1995, and the dome had been officially closed since 1986. Staying out of sight of the landowner's house below, as well as the dozen nearby residents, Peckham quietly threw a

toprope down *Interstate Crack* (5.11b). His climb of the 60-foot finger crack would be one of the last ascents here for the next quarter century.

Nestled in the rolling northern Green Mountains, the spherical, 300-foot-tall Bolton Dome protrudes from a hillside cloaked in maple-birch-beech forest. Ten thousand years ago, glacial Lake Vermont melted and drained, carving out the dome and the Bolton valley. Layers of rock were formed as deep-sea mud experienced intense pressure from the weight of the ice, creating the metamorphic schist.

### TYPE

Sport and trad climbing, bouldering

### GUIDEBOOK

*Tough Schist*, by Travis Peckham

### RESOURCE

[cragvt.org](http://cragvt.org)

### SEASON

April through November, depending on snow



TOTAL CLIMBS

60+



As the layers eroded, they exposed massive ledges, steep faces, and the wavy swirl of quartz veins, shallow pinches, and crisp edges that characterize the dome's climbs.

This stacked crag features some of the state's best climbing. As of November 2019, over 60 trad and sport routes from 5.2 to 5.13c, with projects up to 5.14c, cover the dome's 10 sectors. At the entrance, the 30-foot-high, 45-degree-overhanging Project Boulder features 10 problems from V8 to V14. The Railroad Yard features a mix of 40-foot 5.10 sport and trad climbs, the Main Face boasts 100-foot technical routes like *Release the Hens* (5.11c) and *Crimes of Omission* (5.12b), the Neighborhood Ledge is home to *Mister Rogers* (5.7+) and *Lichenology* (5.10a; 3 pitches), and the Dometop—the most exposed face—has seven 5.12s.

Climbing at the Bolton Dome dates back to the 1960s and Norwich University's Mountain Cold Weather Company, a specialty training unit under the Army ROTC. They performed rescue and rappelling exercises, practiced piton placement and knot tying, and camped at the base. "There were more ancient, rusty ring pitons at the Bolton Dome than anywhere else I've climbed in Vermont," says Kris Fiore, the president of CRAG-VT, Vermont's nonprofit climbing organization. "I wiggled out 20 pitons by hand in one area; it was like a museum of military piton-craft."

In 1972, James Kolocotronis established one of the dome's earliest free climbs, the three-pitch *Seven Cruxes* (5.8+) on the 300-foot main dihedral. An advocate for clean climbing, Kolocotronis wrote in a 1973 *Appalachia* article, "In order to prevent further rock deterioration from pitoning (especially evident on the first lead) and proliferation of fixed pitons (nine at one stance), it is hoped that future ascents will also be all-free." Other locals soon followed Kolocotronis's example, and the ringing of the hammer disappeared from Bolton forever.

Between 1965 and 1986, other climbers including Jamie Brownell, Steven Zajchowski, Chuck Bond, Bob Olsen, David Cass, and Bob Gifford established over 40 trad, aid, and top rope routes, including classic moderates like *Jamathon* (5.7+), a hand crack to a well-protected slab; *Cave Crack* (5.6), a wide crack and chimney; and *Narrow Gauge* (5.9+), a finger crack to a pronounced bulge. During this time, the dome was on private property owned by Michael Parker, whose family home was also on the 48-acre parcel. He and his family granted

permission to the Mountain Cold Weather Company for their training and weren't bothered by other climbers—until 1986.

That year, two unfortunate events sealed the dome's fate. The first occurred when a climbers camped on the cliff, practicing for a big-wall trip out West. Unaware of the climbers' intentions, residents called search and rescue after seeing lights and hearing noises on the rock. The resulting chaos did not paint climbers in a good light. Shortly thereafter, Parker confronted a party of climbers who had parked in his driveway, asking if they had permission to be on his property. When the climbers told him to "F—k off!" and continued walking to the cliff, Parker deflated their tires. A few hours later, the returning climbers had no choice but to knock on Parker's door and sheepishly ask to borrow his air compressor. Shortly after "deflate-gate," the Parkers closed the Bolton Dome to climbers.

With the dome's closure, and the formation of CRAG-VT in 1999, other Bolton valley areas took precedence. Sport areas such as the Bolton Quarry and the Carcass Crag, both a five-minute drive from the dome, were acquired by CRAG-VT in 2004 and 2010, respectively. "It

was a very different way to approach climbing and it was kind of liberating to be able to try that hard," says Peckham, author of the Vermont climbing guidebook, *Tough Schist*. "That's when the whole climbing scene in Vermont took off."

Still, while sport climbing in Bolton valley was taking shape, local advocates had not forgotten about the Bolton Dome. Dick Katzman, a CRAG-VT board member, began reaching out to the Parkers. The relationship started roughly. Not surprisingly, the Parkers did not want climbers back on their property. Katzman persisted, meeting with them year after year. Eventually, Katzman asked if they were interested in subdividing the property so climbers could buy the cliff. "If you have a million dollars, we'll sell you the whole property," the Parkers told him, ending the conversation. Then, 20 years later in 2017, the Parkers reached out to Katzman and CRAG-VT to see if they were interested in making an offer before they put their land on the market. In January 2018, using the Access Fund's largest climbing conservation loan ever (\$358,750), CRAG-VT purchased the lot, including the Parker's house. (CRAG-VT has been actively



Sarah Handrahan battling summer humidity on the thin face of *Release the Hens* (5.11c).



LEFT: Kel Rossiter, owner of Adventure Spirit Guides, clears a new climbers' path during a trail day held for the grand opening in May 2019. RIGHT: Olivia Hunt dials in her balance on *Casual Collusion* (5.10d), atop the Neighborhood Ledge.

raising another \$80,000 to cover the remaining purchase price and install improvements, including parking, a kiosk, trails, etc.)

After the acquisition, a new-routing frenzy began. Initially, Peckham, Fiore, and Seth Maciejowski, CRAG-VT's vice president, agreed to bolt one line each, but then the floodgates opened. "We got a little piece of action initially and then it was a free-for-all," says Maciejowski. And, says Fiore, "The blank faces that were unclimbable 30 years ago are suddenly these really crazy sport routes." Bolton Dome now has eleven 5.12s, the second highest concentration of 5.12s at one crag in Vermont.

Establishing the routes took work. After three decades of inactivity, a leathery lichen covered the rock and took incredible effort to strip away. Peckham spent nearly 11 hours cleaning his 75-foot *Two Times Infinity* (5.12a). The dome's five-minute approach, flat base, and potential for moderate climbing inspired Mischa Tourin, a CRAG-VT board member, to clean a 40-foot-wide slab perfect for budding leaders. "I spent time peeling layers of three-inch-thick turf, cutting it into squares, and tossing it off the slab," says Tourin, who recruited his 74-year-old father and 20-week-pregnant wife to help. "Now we have a really cool classroom," featuring the three beginner leads *Little Wolf* (5.2), *The Country Doctor's Ramble* (5.3), and *Sir Didymus* (5.4).

On May 18, 2019, Tourin coordinated a

trail day. Seventy volunteers constructed new trails, built wooden steps, removed graffiti, and moved boulders blocking the trails. The following September, climbers gathered in Bolton to attend clinics, hear speakers, and climb around the Bolton valley for the first-annual Vermont Climbing Festival.

Although new lines have been scrubbed and sent, more work remains. CRAG-VT is continuing to fundraise \$80,000 to pay off the Access Fund loan and acquire a conservation easement, a legal agreement to protect the land for permanent recreation. Similar to the dome, many untouched and hidden cliffs remain in Vermont, mostly on private property and inaccessible to climbers. But CRAG-VT and the Vermont climbing community plan to make accessing those areas a reality. "While I have traveled to climb in the West, Europe, and Asia—and those places are truly amazing—the combination of community and discovery makes the climbing here special," says Peckham. New areas are waiting to be found in the state, and to Peckham, this is just the start. "While other areas in the country have been fully developed for decades," he says. "Vermont is still living in its golden age."

**MICHAEL PRONZATO** is a climber and freelance photojournalist in Burlington, Vermont. When he's not on the wall, you can find him cycling, exploring the Northeast, and coaching the climbing team at Petra Cliffs.

## Protecting America's Climbing

ACCESSFUND.ORG

TK Access Fund and Rumney Climbers Association are pleased to announce that the final set of privately owned crags at Rumney, New Hampshire—the Northwest Crag—has been acquired and transferred to White Mountain National Forest where they will be protected forever as climber-friendly public lands.

TK AF is tracking a threat to climbing in the Moab region where the BLM is preparing to auction off oil and gas leases. The administration's aggressive energy-dominance policies, combined with the current low price of oil, means just one interested bidder could lay claim to over 100,000 acres of recreation-rich lands around Moab, keeping them tied up in oil and gas leases for decades.

TK The Access Fund-Jeep Conservation Team will partner with CRAGS to begin an extensive restoration effort at California's popular Lover's Leap this summer, establishing a sustainable trail system and addressing critical stability concerns.

