

# Partners in climb

■ *Jim Lawyer and Jeremy Haas aim high while rewriting the book on rock climbing in the Adirondacks.*

BY ALAN WECHSLER  
EXPLORER CORRESPONDENT

**I** met Jim Lawyer and Jeremy Haas at a pull-off on Route 86 in Wilmington Notch, not far from Whiteface Mountain. It was a sunny summer morning, though rain was forecast for later. Above us was a sleek streak of rock on a wooded slope. That was Sunrise Mountain Slab, our destination.

None of us had been there. It could be that no one's climbed this rolling piece of rock in years. Jeremy got out his binoculars. Jim pulled out a Nikon with an expensive zoom lens. They both pointed their optics toward the slab.

"How's the route look?" Lawyer asked Haas.

"Dry."

"It looks like a long [expletive deleted] way," Lawyer said, referring to the cliff's distance from the road—all bushwhack, no trail.

Haas peered some more. "The route on the left has a creaky flake on it," he said. "It's pretty easy to see. The route on the right has that dodgy headwall."

Lawyer nodded. They would find out for themselves soon enough. Shouldering backpacks filled with heavy climbing gear, they forded a thigh-deep stream and began a 45-minute trudge up through the woods to the base of the cliff.

For many people, this would be the start of a day of rock-climbing fun. For Haas and Lawyer, it was another day on the job. Lawyer, 42, a retired software engineer from Syracuse, and Haas, 34, a high-school science teacher living in Glens Falls, have spent most of their free time over the last year researching pretty much every known (legal) rock-climbing route in the Adirondacks. Their goal: the region's first new rock guidebook in well over a decade.

What may seem trivial to non-climbers is a huge deal to those who enjoy dancing up vertical stone. The book is expected to publicize dozens, perhaps hundreds, of new routes. It's also going to present a new look at many older routes, perhaps bringing some forgotten and overgrown climbs back into favor.

The book will succeed *Climbing in the Adirondacks*, first published 25 years ago by Don Mellor, the dean of Adirondack rock and ice climbers. Mellor, who lives in Lake Placid, is now in his mid-50s and recovering from a hip-replacement operation. He happily passed the torch. "I am 100% pleased to be out from under it," he said of his guidebook. "It was kind of fun,

but I'm glad not to be responsible for whether or not the description's right."

Lawyer and Haas's book, *Adirondack Rock*, is scheduled to come out next year. At an estimated \$40, it will be expensive for a rock guidebook. And it likely will be a lot bigger than Mellor's and provide more detail about routes.

Mellor's book contains black-and-white photographs of cliffs with vertical lines showing routes with whimsical names, such as "Fear of Flying" or "Drop, Fly or Die." Descriptions of the routes can be as long as several paragraphs or as simple as "Climb the crack to its top and exit right."

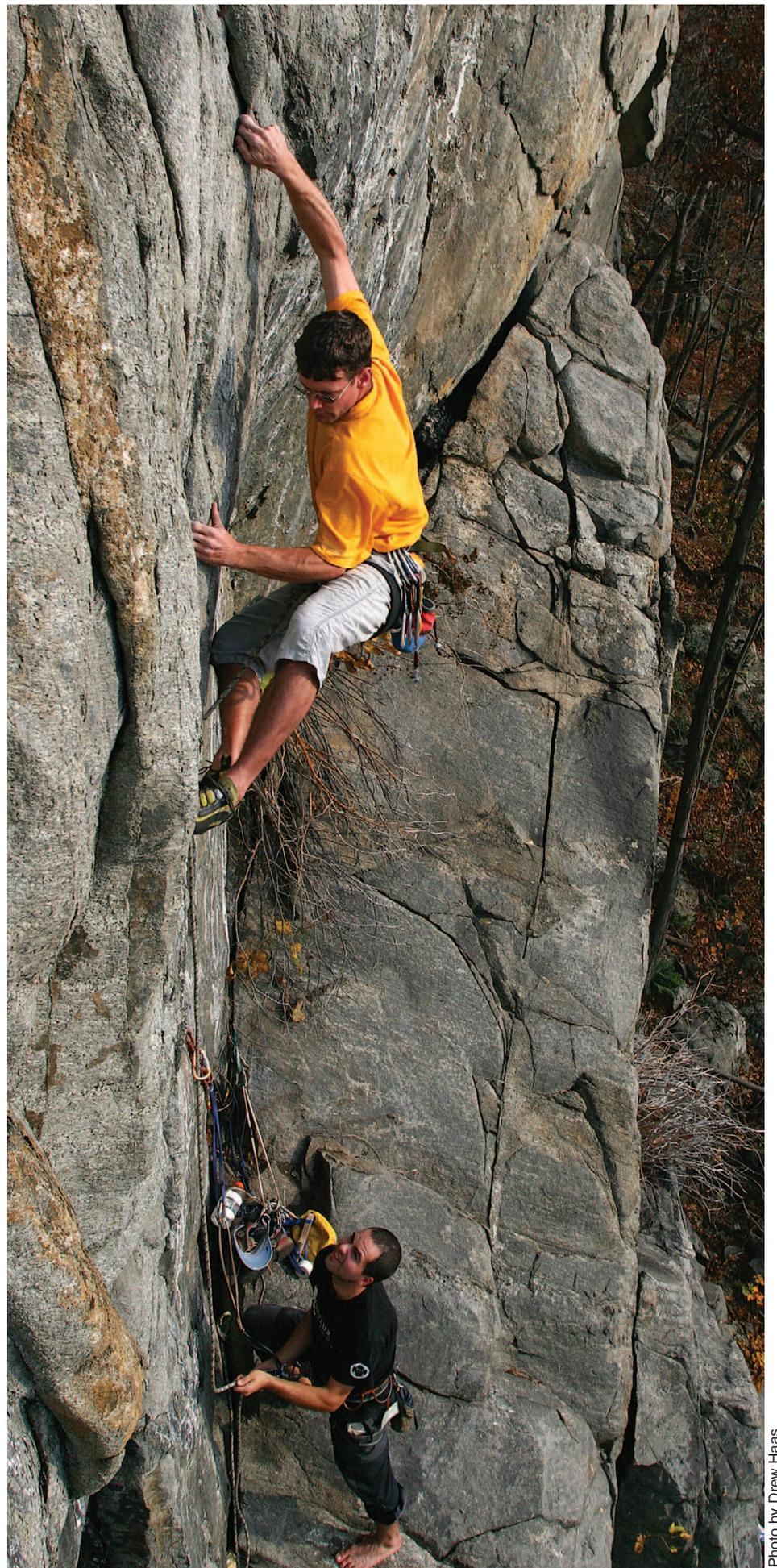
Haas and Lawyer will give precise directions to reach obscure climbs, including GPS readings and maps for bushwhacking. For the popular cliffs, they plan to illustrate routes with climbing topos, a rarity in Eastern guidebooks. The maps depict the features of a cliff, such as cracks, overhangs, ledges and the location of bolts.

"I find it annoying when I spend the time and energy to get to a cliff, and I can't find my route," Lawyer said.

Both authors are serious climbers. Haas, originally from Ithaca, spent much of his 20s living and climbing in Colorado. He came back East to get a graduate degree in education at Cornell University. For the last six years, he's been teaching at Saratoga Springs High School and working as a part-time climbing guide in the Adirondacks. In the winter, he climbs ice and skis the backcountry, despite having damaged all his fingers from frostbite on New Hampshire's Mount Washington several years ago.

Lawyer grew up near Syracuse and after college started Summit Software Co. with some partners. A Web site describes the company as "a global supplier of application customization software products." Whatever that means. Haas still doesn't understand what it is that Lawyer's company does. Suffice it to say that the company has been so successful that Lawyer retired six years ago.

Lawyer has since built a cabin in New Russia called "The Hut," though the heat-



Jeremy Haas climbs an expert route on Potash Mountain in the southern Adirondacks, belayed by Jeremy Morgan.

ed floors, ornate woodwork, central stone fireplace and two-story wall of windows facing the mountains make the name seem a little tongue-in-cheek. And he's traveled around the world, climbing in Asia and Africa as well as all over the United States. His wife, Lucie, sometimes accompanies him on local trips, but she usually stays by the car to work on her watercolors.

"You know how some people are climbers and some people are not?" she said. "Well, I'm in the 'not' category."

Lawyer has written his own computer codes to create programs to help organize route data. When he and Haas began their research, Mellor gave them a bevy of old articles and journals written by Adirondack climbers. On his own, Lawyer dug deeper and found, through a University of Syracuse loan, a rare article by legendary 1930s and 1940s climber Fritz Weissner. The man who pioneered climbing in the Shawangunks near New Paltz had been surprisingly unenthusiastic about the climbing poten-



**Jeremy Haas's knuckles remain swollen from frostbite damage.**

tial of the Adirondacks.

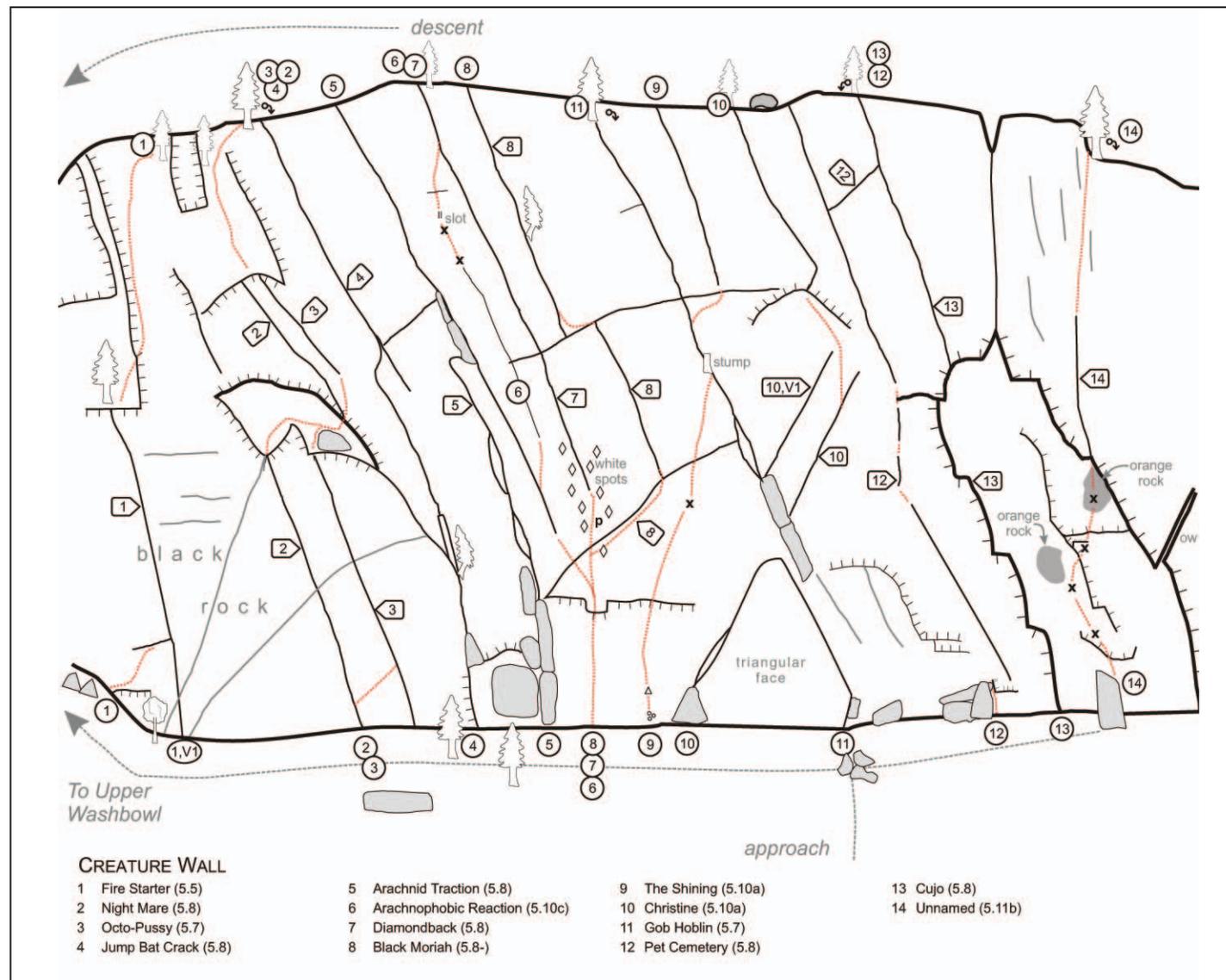
Some detective work was involved. For the Labor Day Wall, a small cliff in Wilmington Notch, two parties reported the first ascent. Haas tracked down the climbers—one an elderly man living in England—and figured out who really earned the honor.

In another case, they discovered that a photograph in Mellor's book had an arrow pointing to the wrong mountain to reach a rarely visited backcountry slab. Not that they have anything bad to say about the Dean. "He was one person, without the technology we have today," Haas said.

To create the topos, they sat below cliffs for days. They mounted transparency paper over photographs and used spotting scopes to accurately trace every route. Those sketches were scanned into a computer, again using a program written by Lawyer, and converted to a more professional-looking topo for publication.

Lawyer and Haas once spent three weeks sitting on the road in front of Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain, one the Adirondacks' major climbing cliffs, to depict the various corners, overhangs, cracks, dihedrals and other features. Poke-O alone will take up 75 pages of what might be a 2-volume opus.

But much of the work entailed climbing routes and keeping track of the details on a digital voice recorder that Lawyer carries



**An example of a climbing map created for Adirondack Rock.**

in his pocket. The first place they visited, in March 2006, was Good Luck Cliffs in the southern Adirondacks. From there, they went from crag to crag on virtually every weekend in the summer and well into fall, rain or shine. In winter, they scouted new routes. Often they went alone to be more efficient. Sometimes they found their way out by headlamp.

All cliffs had to be visited, no matter how obscure. At a place near the hamlet of Azure is a cliff a half-mile long and 300 feet high. The area, known as Deer Pass, takes two hours to get to (including one hour on a mountain bike). Despite the cliff's size, it has only three known climbs on it. The potential is enormous. In some cases, the

authors spent months trying to persuade climbers to reveal their secret cliffs.

For Mellor and perhaps some other old-school climbers, there's a bit of worry that the guidebook will have too much information. Perhaps the wilderness will seem a little less wild if every route is explained in minute detail. He recalled when, in his younger days, he climbed the 3,000-foot-high Salathe Wall on El Capitan in Yosemite Valley. The route took six days, and the entire route description was a couple of paragraphs long.

"As guidebooks get better, the user gets more demanding. He doesn't want to be led astray," Mellor said. "The point is, we didn't expect the guidebook to do all the thinking. If we got lost we were just too stupid."

Haas and Lawyer see it differently. They see the guidebook as a way to get climbers away from the popular classics and onto new routes in unknown areas. The book could help reduce crowds at popular cliffs, they say, and keep lesser-known climbs clean of fast-growing lichen and moss.

To reach Sunrise Mountain Slab, we followed a drainage and ascended moss-covered cliffs. Lawyer and Haas took a moment to note the GPS readings. Then out came the optics, and they scanned the cliff for routes. They spotted some rusty bolts in the rock and checked out what was once said to be a climbing route, now covered in thick moss.

"Jesus," Lawyer said. "Look how furry that is."

Then he roped up and began to climb, commenting on how slippery the rock was and how a flake sounded hollow. Reaching for a heavy brush on a carabiner, he cleaned

the lichen and moss as he moved higher. The route was fairly easy: 5.6 on a scale that goes from 5.1 (easy) to 5.15 (only a few rock Supermen in the world can do it). The route was mostly slab, with few handholds and footholds. On slab, climbers rely on the stickiness of their soft-soled shoes, feeling for tiny indentations in the rock. What holds there were often crumbled in Lawyer's hands. But he soon climbed past the nasty parts.

"This actually isn't so bad," Lawyer said, now 50 feet up and nearly out of sight. A few minutes later: "There's a third bolt!"

Mellor's guidebook reported only one.

"This is why we have to go to every route," Haas said as he payed out rope from below. "We use Don's book as a guide, but we have to go out and do the detective work."

After all three of us climbed the cliff, we sat at the top. Lawyer had his digital recorder out, but they discussed the route in minute detail before committing on descriptions. Finally Lawyer narrated into the microphone: "The route began at the left side of the low point of the slab, just right of a black streak. Climb up to some flakes, step right to a bolt."

"Go to a horizontal at 30 feet," Haas added.

"Over that to a flexi-flake, then pure friction, then straight up and trend right," Lawyer said.

They continued talking. Off in the distance, a rainstorm appeared over the High Peaks, heading our way. We had time to rappel down before the rain hit, but that was hardly the end of our day. After lunch we were off again, this time exploring obscure climbs below the Three Brothers Trail in the Johns Brook Valley. It was pouring rain. ■



**Jeremy Haas and Jim Lawyer on Sunrise Mountain Slabs.**