

North Conway Rock Climbs

Second Edition

by Jerry Handren & Tom Moulin

© 2022 by Jerry Handren & Tom Moulin.

All rights reserved under international and United States of America copyright conventions. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means: graphic, electronic, or mechanized; including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems, without the written permission by the author, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

All images are by Jerry Handren or Tom Moulin unless noted. When noted, the copyright belongs to the photographer, artist, or organization that loaned the image or images for use in this book.

ISBN-13: 978-1-7923-7839-3

First Edition: 2012

Cover photograph: Will Wild on Altered States at Band M (p.165).

Back cover (left to right): Jon Nicolodi on Pressure Drop (p.125). Dhane Knakkegaard on Dominatrix at Bald Bluff (p.446). A fall scene near Pinkham Notch. Molly Mundy on Stewart's Crack at Green's Cliff (p.45).

Warning! Read before using this book.

Climbing is an extremely dangerous activity. Always use judgment rather than the opinions represented in this book. The authors assume no responsibility for injury or death resulting from the use of this book. The information in this book is based on opinions gathered from a variety of sources. Do not rely solely on the information, descriptions, or difficulty ratings, as these are entirely subjective. If you are unwilling to assume complete responsibility for your safety, do not use this book.

The authors and publisher expressly disclaim all representations and warranties regarding this guide, the accuracy of the information herein, and the results of your use hereof, including without limitation, implied warranties of merchantability and fitness for a particular purpose. The user assumes all risk associated with the use of this guide.

NORTH CONWAY VICINITY MAP



to Berlin

16

TUMBLEDOWN DICK

Gilead

Gorham

2

Mount Moriah

CONNIE - SOLSTICE ZONE

HUNTINGTON RAVINE

WILD RIVER CRAG

LAUGHING LION

Mount Washington

SQUARE LEDGE

LOW BASIN CRAG

SHELL POND

to Lancaster

to Carroll

Pinkham Notch

HALL'S LEDGE

302

FRANKENSTEIN

STAIRS MOUNTAIN

JACKSON CRAG

NEW HAMPSHIRE MAINE

113

5

THE CAPTAIN

MISSING WALL

IRON MOUNTAIN SLAB

Jackson

Glen

ATTITASH CRAG

WHITE'S LEDGE

HUMPHREY'S LEDGE

CATHEDRAL LEDGE

WHITEHORSE LEDGE

113

5

Bartlett

North Conway

JOCKEY'S CAP

GREEN'S CLIFF

OWL'S CLIFF

TABLE MOUNTAIN SLAB

RAINBOW SLABS

SUNDOWN LEDGES

WOODCHUCK LEDGE

Conway

Fryeburg

113

5

to Lincoln

112

HEDGEHOG MOUNTAIN

MOUNT CHOCORUA

WHITE LEDGE

ALBANY SLABS

BAND M LEDGE

SQUARE LEDGE

SANDWICH NOTCH

113

to Ossipee, Boston MA

16

302

5



to Rumford

to Rumford

to Lewiston

to Lewiston

to Portland

to Portland

to Portland

Sebago Lake

SHAGG CRAG

BUCK'S LEDGE

BEACH WALL

TWITCHEL POND

BALD BLUFF

Bethel

Locke Mills

West Paris

Greenwood

Stoneham

Norway

Bridgton

2

108

26

5

219

26

117

118

118

35

117

302

117

302

95

4 INTRODUCTION

About this Guidebook

This guidebook covers a broad geographical area loosely centered on the town of North Conway, stretching from the crest of the Kancamagus Highway in the west, down through the Mount Washington Valley, and east to the crags in Evans Notch and near Bethel in western Maine.

As a climbing venue, it has a lot to offer, including everything from short sport routes to epic multipitch traditional climbs—some close to the road, others miles away in a sea of trees. With a wide collection of rock types, including granite, schist, gneiss, and even some exceptional volcanic rocks, the climbing is varied, unique, and thought-provoking.

Alongside the exceptional routes, this area is one of the oldest climbing grounds in North America. The hallowed granite faces of Cathedral and Whitehorse Ledges are particularly well-known for hosting an incredible collection of traditional routes that have been established over many generations.

Further off the beaten path, the wild, remote feel of backcountry climbing in the White Mountains has been a draw for decades. In recent years, there has been a surge of route development, resulting in the addition of many new routes at some of the most beautiful cliffs in America, like Green's Cliff, Square Ledge, and Stairs Mountain.

Additionally, the tremendous potential of the schist cliffs of western Maine has finally been realized. This has resulted in a large, and growing, collection of sport climbs, including some of the best in New England at cliffs such as Wild River, Laughing Lion, Squaredock, Shagg, Bald Bluff, and many other smaller venues.

Add it all up, and you have more than 2200 rock climbs of all grades and styles, representing one of the most diverse collections of routes to be found in any single area in the country.

This guidebook includes detailed descriptions of almost all the routes in the area. Rather than being a compilation of descriptions from other sources, this book is based on the firsthand experience of the authors, with new, updated descriptions. As well as the written descriptions, this guidebook makes extensive use of photodiagrams, custom-drawn maps, and GPS data to ease the process of finding the cliff and finding the route. Our goal has been to make this the most usable, accurate, and detailed guidebook for the area.



Trevor Curtain on pitch 3 of The Zag at Square Ledge. Page 29.

The Land, Rules, & Regulations

The bulk of the crags in this guidebook are in the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF). For information such as road and cliff closures, campsite information, recreation passes, and so forth check the WMNF website:

www.fs.usda.gov/main/whitemountain/home

Alternatively, the Saco Ranger District office has this information as well. Their phone number is (603) 447-5448. The office is located about 100 yards west of Route 16 on the north side of the Kancamagus Highway.

The following climbing-specific standards are outlined in the 2005 White Mountain National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan:

- S-1: The White Mountain National Forest is open, unless designated closed to rock, ice, and mixed climbing.
- S-2: Except in Wilderness (see MA 5.1) where it is prohibited, storing (caching) equipment, including fixed ropes is permitted for no more than 14 days.
- S-3: Chipping to create foot and hand holds, gluing to stabilize features, and attaching permanent artificial handholds is prohibited.
- S-4: Route cleaning is prohibited where federally-listed threatened, endangered, and sensitive species occur.
- S-5: To protect natural features, the use of mechanical or motorized devices, explosives, or chemicals for cleaning or developing climbing routes is prohibited. Hand drills and power drills are permitted for the installation of bolt protection, except in Wilderness where power drills are prohibited.



Mount Washington from Bear Notch Road

Some cliffs, such as Square Ledge, Wild River Crag, and Stairs Mountain, are in Wilderness. These federally designated areas have special regulations intended to reduce human impact. In general, group size is limited to 10 people. Specifically for rock climbing:

- S-1 Wilderness is open unless closed to rock, ice, and mixed climbing.
- S-2 The use of power drills is prohibited.
- S-3 Storing equipment, including fixed ropes, is prohibited.
- S-4 Installation of fixed protection, including webbing, bolts, or pitons, is prohibited on new climbing routes.

Cathedral Ledge and Whitehorse Ledge are in Echo Lake State Park, which has its own set of rules that mostly relate to the opening and closing of access roads, but that have few restrictions on climbers.

The cliffs in the Evans Notch and Bethel areas are a different story. Some of the cliffs are in the WMNF, but most are on private land. The inclusion of a cliff in this guidebook in no way implies a right of access, and the descriptions should be considered nothing more than an attempt to document the climbing that has occurred for historical purposes. Where climbing is tolerated, and to ensure continued access, climbers

should show due consideration and respect to the wishes of the landowners at all times.

Perhaps the most important restriction on climbers relates to peregrine falcons. Peregrines almost became extinct due to the widespread use of the pesticide DDT after World War II. DDT's effect on the birds' eggs caused a precipitous decline in the population. Once the problem was recognized and DDT banned, the falcon population slowly recovered. Part of the recovery process included giving nesting birds a wide safety zone by restricting access to the parts of the cliffs where they nested. There are nesting birds on several of the cliffs in this book: Cathedral Ledge, Laughing Lion, and the Painted Walls

to name three. Where the birds nest, portions of the cliffs around the nests are usually closed until nesting season ends in late July or early August. The closed areas are clearly marked, using posters on prominent trees. The specific closures sometimes change from year to year, depending on where the birds nest. In order to maintain

good relationships with the land managers, it is vitally important that these closures be respected. Thankfully, peregrines are no longer on the Endangered Species List and restrictions may well be lifted as the population continues to recover.

Many of the access roads in the area are not maintained for winter travel. Bear Notch Road, Passaconaway Road, Evans Notch Road (Route 113), Sawyer River Road, and several others are usually closed by the first major snowfall, sometime in November. The roads generally do not open again until they are clear of snow in the spring, usually in early May.

Friends of the Ledges, an affiliate of the Access Fund, is the local stewardship and advocacy organization for climbing in the eastern White Mountains. Comprised entirely of volunteers, Friends of the Ledges works to develop and sustain good relationships between climbers and land managers in the region. The organization also manages bolt replacement. An updated list of recently replaced bolts and a form to submit observations of old bolts is available on their website. Learn more and become a member: www.nhledges.org or email: friends@nhledges.org

In coordination with the Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue and the NH Fish and Game, the Mountain Rescue Service handles technical rescues in the White Mountain Region. This is a volunteer organization, consisting mostly of local guides and climbers, and depends on donations to operate. The Mountain Rescue Service deserves your support whether you reside here or are traveling through. Donations can be sent to: Mountain Rescue Service, PO Box 494, North Conway, NH 03860

In the event of an accident call:
 International Mountain Equipment (IME): (603) 356-7013
 NH Fish and Game: (603) 271-3421
 North Conway Fire and Rescue: 911

6 INTRODUCTION

The Rock

Generally speaking, there are three different rock types found in the area covered by this guidebook: granite, gneiss and schist, and a volcanic rock called syenite.

The syenite is only found in a small area on the north side of the eastern end of the Kancamagus Highway (Route 112). Syenite is a beautiful, solid, fine-grained rock that is very good for climbing. There are a lot of attractive thin cracks and corners in syenite that allow for some very good traditional climbing. The faces have a lot of small, square-cut edges, and the occasional flake, which makes for some very good, and usually quite fingery sport climbing, mostly in the upper grades.

Most of the cliffs in the area consist of various forms of granite. This is quite a variable medium that can be featureless (much of Green's Cliff), or covered in holds (The Wonderwall on Whitehorse, the Thin Air Face on Cathedral). Mostly it is a very solid, medium-grained rock that provides superb climbing and is typically characterized by cracks, corners, and faces that are vertical or less. Climbing on granite often requires the use of specific techniques, such as hand or finger jams for most of the crack climbs. Even the face climbing is a different style from that found on other types of rock; it is generally not as steep, but is often a lot more blank for a given grade. Granite is not a rock that is very forgiving of poor technique, and for most, the learning curve is not very steep. The bottom line is

that it takes time and effort to learn the skills needed to climb here. But, once mastered, you have one of the best collections of traditional-style routes in the country as a playground.

The hills to the north and east of North Conway have many outcrops whose rock is categorized as gneiss and schist.

These rocks have been subject to intense heat and pressure,

resulting in a modified form of the original. At crags such as Buck's Ledge, Jockey's Cap, or Shell Pond's Family Crag, the base rock – granite – has been contorted and transformed into a 'granitic gneiss.' Schist, being slightly different, originates as a sedimentary rock, such as sandstone, and is transformed through heat and pressure into a mica-rich rock found at places such as Shell Pond's Main Cliff, the Beach Wall, Tumbledown Dick, and the Connie - Solstice Zone.

From a climbing point of view, gneiss and schist generally lend themselves to sport climbs for a number of reasons. Typically, gneiss and schist have a crumbly surface in their natural states, but they clean up quickly to leave a really nice, grippy rock. Unlike granite, the gneiss and schist are usually covered with an interesting and varied assortment of face holds, which allow for some very steep climbing, and many long, pumpy pitches. The gneiss and schist provide a gymnastic style of climbing that complements the technical granite and fingery syenite.



Ray Rice on the attractive 'dike rock' of Wet Market at Maine's Bald Bluff. Page 447.

The Weather

The rock climbing season in North Conway generally extends from early April to the end of October, but conditions vary greatly from year to year and it is not at all uncommon to find good climbing conditions outside of these months. Certain cliffs, such as Shell Pond, Shagg Crag, the South Buttress of Whitehorse, and Squaredock Ledge are very sunny and sheltered and can have great climbing even in the depths of winter. Conversely, a late spring snowfall can sometimes keep Cathedral Ledge soaking wet until early May.

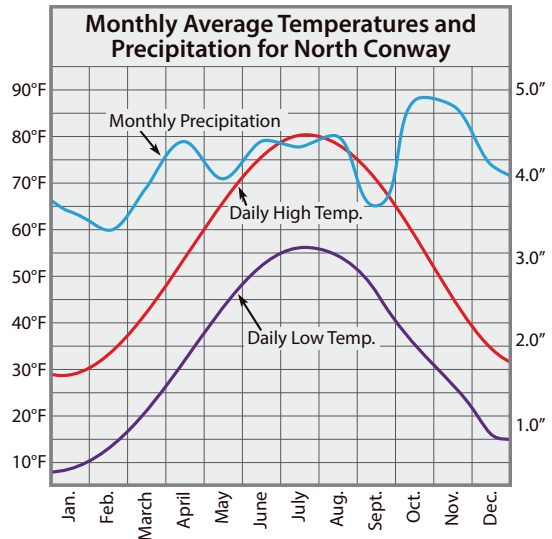
Usually, the spring and fall have the best climbing conditions, with pleasantly sunny days, cool temperatures, and relatively low humidity providing great friction. The summer can be hot and humid, but not unreasonably so, and seldom for long. Furthermore, great conditions can, and often do, blow through at any time.

There is quite a lot of rock in the area that is climbable when it's raining. Sundown (Main Cliff), Shell Pond (Main Cliff), Shagg Crag, the Cathedral Cave, and parts of Band M all have quite a lot of climbing that stays dry. It is usually possible to salvage a bit of climbing out of even the soggiest day.

Sometime in May, black flies and mosquitoes start to make their presence felt. They are usually pretty thick in the air for a couple of weeks, before gradually thinning out towards the end of the hottest months, and are more or less gone by September. For the uninitiated, the first few weeks of bug season can be very unpleasant, making the heavy use of insect repellent pretty much mandatory. However, wearing the right sort of clothes, knowing

which cliffs to avoid, and climbing at the right time of day can all make a big difference, and make even the worst few weeks manageable.

In recent years, ticks have increasingly become an issue throughout the area during the spring. With a number of serious diseases being communicable from ticks, it is prudent to perform frequent and thorough checks.



Staying in North Conway

North Conway is a tourist town and is set up to cater to visitors. Unfortunately, that doesn't mean that there's much of the type of accommodation that climbers typically seek. The numerous family campgrounds in the North Conway area are mostly busy, noisy, and very expensive. Even the various National Forest campgrounds are quite pricey and often booked up months in advance. Car-camping is possible but surprisingly awkward and restricted. In particular, the old standby of car-camping underneath Cathedral Ledge is no longer allowed. The same is true for all the National Forest trailhead parking areas. In the National Forest, camping is only allowed at the designated campsites. Backcountry camping and fires are allowed, but not within 0.25 miles of any roads, bodies of water, designated campsites, huts, and so forth.

Having said that, there are plenty of out of the way spots where it is possible to hunker down for the night. This is especially true as you get further away from the hub of North Conway. Just remember to keep a low profile and to keep your spot clean.

One of the nice things about car-camping in this area are all the beautiful rivers, which have a tremendous selection of great swimming holes; a real treat after a hot days climbing. For drinking water, there is a public water pump on the west side of the Saco River, just past the bridge on River Road.

There are three climbing shops in North Conway: Ragged Mountain Equipment in Intervale, International Mountain Equipment in downtown North Conway, and Eastern Mountain Sports at the south end of the North Conway strip.

Most of the area has cell phone coverage, but it can be temperamental and spotty. In some of the more remote spots there is no coverage at all.



Notes on the Use of this Guidebook

In Nevada, if you drive off the road just once, your tire marks can be seen in the desert for years afterwards. In New England, on the other hand, through leaves dropping, roots growing, storms flooding, and ground freezing and thawing, a well-used trail can disappear between the fall and the spring. It seems plausible that if Mankind was to suddenly die off, the great New England forests would swallow up all signs of our existence within 100 years.

Things change quickly here: a cleaned route will grow over with lichen; a spotless crack will fill with dirt; a rappel tree will get blown down; a logging road will get swallowed up by new tree growth. Aside from these naturally occurring changes, new routes will get added, bolts and pins will be chopped, or replaced, or repositioned, and cliffs will fall in and out of popularity. In short, this guidebook is a snapshot of the climbing in the North Conway area at a particular point in time. As we move away from that point in time, things will change – sometimes drastically. New online resources, such as Mountain Project and NE Climbs, are a great way to keep track of some of the changes that do occur. We have tried to make the information in this book both detailed and accurate, but ultimately, climbers must rely on their own good judgment to keep safe. What follows are some pointers to help users of this guidebook interpret the information that it contains.

Layout

This guidebook has ten chapters which correspond to ten different areas within the overall region. The areas roughly go from west to east, and south to north. Each area generally includes a collection of cliffs that are close together. Cathedral and Whitehorse Ledges are such big cliffs that they each have their own chapter. Within each chapter, the different cliffs are described with an access map that tells you how to get to the parking area, and an approach map that tells you how to get to the cliff.

The routes on smaller cliffs are described and numbered all at once in a single section, but bigger, more complex cliffs may be subdivided into several different sections, usually corresponding to well-defined features of the cliff. Such cliffs will usually have an overview picture with the individual sections illustrated.

Route Descriptions

Route Number: 9
 Route name: Short but Sweet
 Route length: 65'
 Route grade: 5.11a
 Quality rating: ★
 Symbols: †

Red for sport route
 First Ascent Details
 Gear

9 Short but Sweet 65' 5.11a ★ †
 Jimmy Dunn, Rick Wilcox, Joe Cote. 1975.
 Single rack to 2.5", double 0.75" to 1.25" cams.
 Climb easy terrain to the roof, then battle out the burly hand crack to a hard move around the lip. Finish with by climbing a low-angled trough to the trees.
Descent: Rappel with one rope.

Route Number

Some routes within a section are assigned a route number. If a route has a route number, then the number is used to identify that route on a photo diagram or plan map. If a route has no

route number, then it is not marked on a photo diagram or plan map. In most cases, route descriptions are on the same page as their photo diagram. In certain sections, where the route descriptions are spread over several pages, the photo diagram containing those routes will always be within that section. When the photo diagram contains numerous route lines that could lead to confusion, multiple colors are used for the route lines. This is merely to help distinguish one route from another.

● A sport climb. A route that is protected exclusively by closely-spaced bolts with a fixed anchor at the top. All sport climbs, whether they appear in diagrams or not, are marked with the red dot symbol. Conversely, black dots are used for traditional and mixed routes. If a route has no dot, it is assumed to be traditionally protected.

Route Names

Generally the route names are those given by the first ascent party. However, there were quite a few mystery routes with no established name. Rather than having numerous 'Unknowns,' we have taken the liberty of providing a name for every route in the book. In future guidebook editions, some route names will change as their real names come to light. Hopefully, the confusion that this causes is the lesser of two evils.

Length

This is the actual climbing length of the route rather than the vertical height gained. It takes the place of the commitment grade (I,II,III,IV, etc.) since along with the description, it gives a pretty accurate idea of the scale of the undertaking.

Grade

The Yosemite Decimal System is used: 5.0 to 5.14 with the grades from 5.10 up subdivided into a,b,c, and d. In a few cases, we have used the standard seriousness ratings (R and X). But generally, where a route is known to be serious for some reason, this will be mentioned in the description. Do not assume that a route is safe just because there is no seriousness rating or any mention of danger in the description.

Star Rating

This guidebook uses a three star system to rate the quality of the routes. Obviously, this is a very subjective undertaking and these ratings should be taken with a grain of salt. Certain personal biases no doubt crept into the assessment. Clean rock, sweeping natural lines, and sustained climbing are factors that increase the quality of a route. Loose rock, dirt, a wandering or contrived line, or a combination thereof are seen as deterrents.

We have tried to be very conservative in doling out stars so that the really good routes stand out; this is mostly done to point visiting climbers to the very best routes. The fact that a route has no stars does not mean that it is not worth doing. Instead, we have tried to mention in the text if a route is really poor quality.

It is worth pointing out that this book describes a very diverse collection of climbing areas – it's hard to compare a six pitch granite trad climb with a 40' schist sport route. Certainly, many Rumney climbers are of the opinion that no granite slab deserves any stars – ever. If a route gets stars, it means that it's a good route of its type. And if you're a 5.13 climber who just got spanked on a beautiful 5.9 slab, just remember – it's not the route that's crap, it's your technique!

Old Bolts

Many of the old quarter-inch bolts have been replaced with solid 3/8" bolts, but quite a few still remain, especially on older routes on some of the more obscure cliffs. These bolts are unreliable and should be backed up, if possible.

Symbols

The dagger symbol (†) is used for routes where we have been unable to track down a definitive description. The given route description should be treated as a very rough guide at best.

Pitch Numbers

On many of the multipitch routes on the taller cliffs like Whitehorse and Cathedral Ledges, adjacent climbs will often share the first several pitches. Where this is the case, the pitch numbers of a route that breaks off from the main line reflect the number of pitches required to reach that point. For example, Wavelength starts by climbing the first 4 pitches of Standard Route; so the first pitch number is 5.

First Ascent Details

Where possible, the names of the first ascent team are included. Generally, the name that appears first is the climber who led the pitch, or on multipitch routes, the hardest pitch. Having said that, many of the older routes put up in ground-up style were very much a team effort, with climbers taking turns, figuring out moves, and drilling holes.

Equipment Recommendations

Where possible, we have tried to include a recommended gear list. This is a very rough guide to what a climber comfortable at the grade might need to protect a particular climb.

Example: *Single rack to 3"*

This would be a full set of wires, and a full set of cams from a Metolius #00 to a #3 Camelot. It would also include a number of biners, slings, and quickdraws appropriate for the particular type of climb.

Tricams are particularly useful for the occasional crystal pockets that appear on slab climbs at places like The Slabs on Whitehorse and Rainbow Slabs.

Small brass nuts are pretty much essential on many climbs. They are described under the general term RPs, which was the original producer of this type of nut. If a description calls for RPs, then any of the modern equivalents will do.

Many of the trad routes done in the 1980s and early 1990s were originally climbed with double ropes. The use of double ropes is a bit of a dying art in New England these days. But where double ropes are really helpful, either to protect the leader or the second, we have tried to mention this in the gear recommendations.

Cam Size	Metolius	Black Diamond Camelots	Wild Country Friends	Aliens	Trango Big Bros
0.4"	00	0.1		Black	
0.5"	0	0.2	00	Blue	
0.6"	1	0.3	0	Green	
0.75"	2	0.4	0.5	Yellow	
1"	3	0.5	1	Grey	
1.25"	4	0.75	1.5	Red	
1.5"	5	1	2	Orange	
1.75"	6	2	2.5	Violet	
2"	7	2	3	White	
2.5"	8	3	3.5		
3"	9	3 to 4	4		
3.5"	10	4	4 to 5		1
4"-5"		5	5		2
5"-7"		6	6		2 to 3
8"-12"					4
11"-18"					5

GPS

When Jerry Handren lived in North Conway in the 1980s and 1990s, it was not at all uncommon for climbers to get lost in the woods. Jimmy Dunn once got lost when walking over to Whitehorse from the top of Cathedral with a client. They ended up bushwhacking south for five miles, eventually stumbling out onto the Passaconaway Road as darkness fell, covered in cuts and with their clothes in tatters. Pretty much everyone who climbs around North Conway has gotten lost at one time or another. This was always a particular source of anxiety when exploring some of the more remote or hard-to-find crags, such as Owl's Cliff, or the Outback Cliff at Sundown.

It came as a bit of a revelation to Handren, when he came back to North Conway to work on this book and started to use a GPS for the first time.

A GPS is an incredibly useful tool when climbing in this area. Its correct use virtually assures that you'll find your intended cliff, and more importantly, your way back to the car. There is more than enough information in this book to find every cliff and climb without using GPS; in fact one crusty old local veteran once suggested that if you need a GPS to get there, then you probably shouldn't be there. Nevertheless, if

for nothing more than peace of mind, we recommend that any climbers new to the area familiarize themselves with these devices and use them for any backcountry climbing. Having said that, no gizmo is a substitute for good judgment, and remember that batteries get low and devices get lost, wet, and broken.

In the text, we have included GPS data for almost all of the cliffs. Generally, this includes key junctions on the access roads, the parking area, key points on the approach trail, where the approach trail hits the cliff, and key routes and features on the cliff. The GPS coordinates in this book were collected using a Garmin Oregon 450 and a Garmin Oregon 700 with the following format:

Datum: WGS 84

Position Format: Lat/Lon hddd°mm.mmm'

On the website www.northconwayrockclimbs.com we have stored the tracks recorded when doing the approach hikes. These can be downloaded onto GPS devices and used to assist with navigation.