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Climbing Routes Evaluation, City of Boulder
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CITY OF BOULDER MOUNTAIN PARKS

CLIMBING ROUTES EVALUATION:
Dinosaur Mountain
Skunk Canyon

by
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INTRODUCTION:

Both Dinosaur Mountain and Skunk Canyon have in recent years become a focus for sport climbing activity. The introduction of rappel-bolted routes, and the corresponding increase in the numbers of climbers using the area have impacted vegetation, wildlife, and the cliffs themselves quite heavily. For the purposes of this report, Dinosaur Mountain is defined as the area South of Bear Creek extending North up to Skunk Creek, and running West from Square Rock (alongside Mallory Cave Trail) to the Western-most strata of rock known as Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum, Dum, and the North Ridge. Skunk Canyon includes all boulders in and immediately adjacent to Skunk Creek, as well as Ridges One, Two, Three, and Four on the North side of the Canyon.

DESCRIPTION, LOCATION, AND ACCESS:

A large proportion of the climbs on Dinosaur Mountain are accessed by social trails that extend off of Mallory Cave Trail. If one follows Mallory Trail until it takes a sharp turn North just past Der Zerkle and shortly before approaching the cave itself, a well-beaten footpath will be seen running South up into the cirque that runs along the South face of The Hand. This footpath will be referred to as the Cirque Trail throughout the rest of this report. It is a major highway that leads to most of the significant and easily accessible climbs on Dinosaur, and I have noticed a definite worsening of erosion on and around it during the four month course of this study. The Cique Trail runs along the base of many routes

and is thus host to litter in the form of tape balls and rings, which I have frequently collected, as well as other discarded bits of equipment and stick-clipping accessories. I have also observed a significant amount of hikers on this trail, most of whom were wandering about, seeking Mallory Cave. The Cirque Trail receives so much use that in some places it is almost as wide as Mallory Trail, and it deceives ordinary hikers into trying to follow it. A climbing access sign or two would greatly clarify the junction of these two trails. Other forms of access into the Dinosaur/Skunk area consist of social trails that run directly through the riparian alongside both Bear and Skunk Creeks. Extensive usage of these trails to access climbing routes on the extreme North and South sides of Dinosaur Mountain as well as routes in Skunk Canyon has resulted in denudation and erosion along the banks and (I would suspect) increased sedimentation in the creeks themselves. In addition, the gullies running up from the creek between the various strata of rock on Dinosaur are very steep and are eroding quickly as people continue to use them to scramble up and down.

FIXED PROTECTION, RAPPEL ANCHORS, AND CHALK USE:

Many of the crags on Dinosaur Mountain and in Skunk Canyon sport faces bristling with bolts. Certain rocks in particular, such as Der Zerkle, The Hand, The Finger Flatiron, The Box, and The Bubble have a high number of sport routes on them. Altogether, I counted 56 "sport" routes in the Dino-Skunk area, and an approximate total of 309 pieces of fixed gear (bolts, pins, and bashies only) on all climbs, traditional or sport, in my survey.

242 of those pieces are located on Dinosaur Mountain, and 67 of them are in Skunk Canyon. Almost all of the sport routes feature slings or chains at the top which serve as rappel anchors. Often the slings are brightly colored and in sharp contrast to the natural features of the rock and the surrounding vegetation. I could discern no attempt in any case to camouflage fixed protection by using neutral-colored slings or by painting bolts, hangers, and chains to match the rock, nor did I see any of the pre-painted camouflaged bolt hangers now commercially available in use. Most of the modern bolts are 3/8" with SMC, Metolius, Petzl, and (occasionally) ring-bolt hangers. Chalk usage was fairly concentrated in several different parts of the area, particularly on rocks such as The Hand, Der Freischutz, Der Zerkle, The Dwarf, The Finger Flatiron, The Box, and The Bubble on Dinosaur Mountain. I did not discern much chalk in Skunk Canyon in large part due to the fact that raptor-protection related closures of many routes there were in effect at the time of my study. The exception to that in Skunk is the highly noticeable route called The Guardian, which hangs over Skunk Canyon Trail on the South Face of Ridge One and has most of its moves clearly marked by high concentrations of chalk. Extremely chalked-up routes on Dinosaur include Power Bulge, Drugs, Nude Figures in a Hollow Fruit, and all of the climbs on the East Face of Square Rock.

ROUTE DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL IN AREA:

Both Dinosaur Mountain and Skunk Canyon are comprised of rock that is for the most part of fairly good quality for climbing. Sport climbers have tended to limit most of their development to the shorter West, South, and North-facing cliffs, and have sought out clean, relatively short "face-climbing" lines. The entire area was very active in terms of bolting immediately preceding the ban, and there are attractive faces left unbolted still. I have no doubt that had the ban not occurred, the Dino-Skunk area would have continued to have been steadily bolted.

WILDLIFE/RAPTOR SIGHTINGS, HABITAT, AND CONCERNS:

The closure of most of Skunk Canyon, much of Fern Canyon, and The Sacred Cliffs this Spring sent sport climbers bent on doing routes in the Flatirons to Dinosaur Mountain. Every clear weekend I counted at least a dozen people climbing on a given day. This has had a definite impact on the vegetation wherever these people go, as well as on the wildlife. I saw very little wildlife on Dinosaur short of squirrels, though I did locate what I believe to be a prairie falcon eyrie on the South face of The Hand. I did observe the Golden Eagles who nest in Skunk Canyon circling that area several times, and occasionally I observed them overflying the North side of Dinosaur Mountain. Two separate climbs in Skunk Canyon run directly through eagle nests. Obviously, all of the rocks in the area are potentially excellent raptor habitat, but I did not observe any eagle nest sites other than the ones currently

being monitored in Skunk Canyon. The most predominant organisms in the area were Ponderosa pine and humans.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Skunk Canyon/Dinosaur Mountain area would greatly benefit from the placement of climbing access signs at strategic trail junctions, the installation of climbing information trailhead signs at NCAR, and increased raptor closure notice signing. Trail construction that would lift social trails out of the riparian along Bear and Skunk Creeks is badly needed, and erosion-control measures along inter-crag access trails would slow denudation, perhaps help revegetate, and slow expansion of these paths. Trails should be relocated in a manner that channels users onto low-angle rock or stable talus environments, in an effort to prevent further destabilization of the sandy soil in the gullies between rocks. The sandy soil in the gullies on the South side of Dinosaur (which run East-West between the strata) is in particular danger of sliding into Bear Creek.

In addition to these measures, any type of organized chalk clean-up and/or efforts to camouflage hardware and slings would add much to restoring some degree of the natural appearance of the area. I also recommend a policy of removal and closure towards any bolts and routes that are placed in locations which threaten established raptor nest sites, including the three bolts above the eagle's nest on The Inferno (Skunk Canyon; Ridge Two). Patrol of these areas should be increased and sustained to monitor climbers, protect the wildlife and vegetation, and enhance the safety of all

of the users and inhabitants of Dinosaur Mountain and Skunk Canyon
as the area continues to see increased heavy use.