

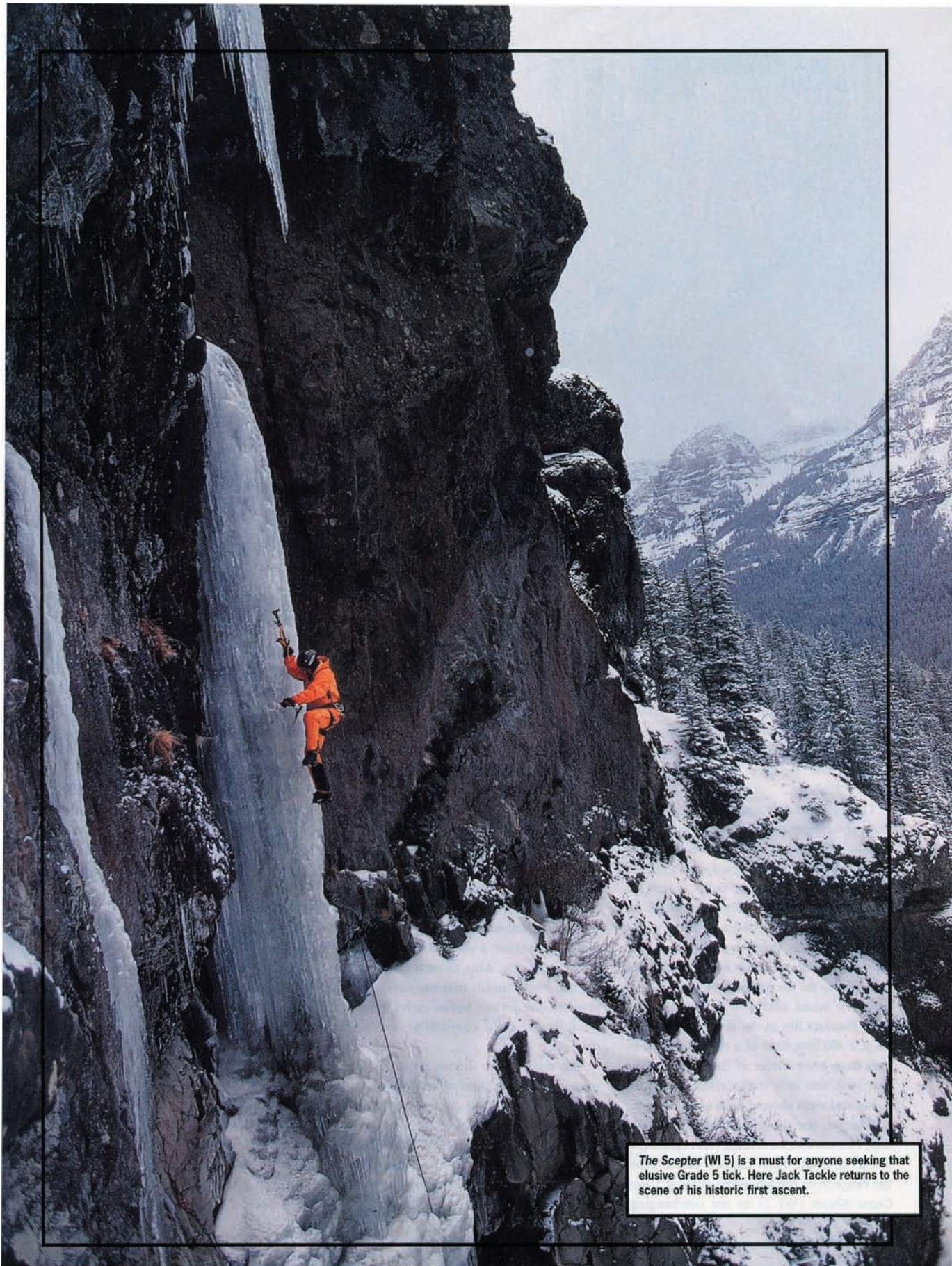
# HYALITE BLUES

**In Alex's kingdom, you gotta obey the Rules.**

---

**By Hans Saari — Photos by Kristoffer Erickson**

**A**lex Lowe hangs from one arm, his feet dangling in the swirling gray mist. "Watch me!" he calls. Then, with a toothy smile, he cranks a one-arm pull-up, and *thunks* his axe into a groaning drip of ice. No crowd cheers him on and no bolts await him should things go awry. The only sounds — laboring lungs, moaning metal — are those of desperate climbing in one of the world's greatest ice arenas.



*The Scepter (WI 5) is a must for anyone seeking that elusive Grade 5 tick. Here Jack Tackle returns to the scene of his historic first ascent.*



The late, great Alex Lowe working *Bulldog World*. A bolted direct start to *Bingo World*, the route does not yet have a consensus rating.

Climbing in Hyalite, which lies 20 miles outside of Bozeman, Montana, is all about effort. A typical foray may involve rallying up rut-infested, snowy roads, flopping through waist-deep snow, and retreating in a raging blizzard. Why bother? The payback is adventure and quality climbing.

Three parallel drainages, Flanders, The East Fork, and Hyalite proper, hold the bulk of the climbs. While each drainage has a similar topography — a canyon lined with stratified andesite and conglomerate walls — each has its own distinct treasures. Hyalite proper is the area's hub, with the easiest access and widest variety. You can drink hot chocolate and top rope till your arms drop at the Genesis area or saddle up for the ride of your life on one of the steep mixed climbs of the Black Magic Wall. Flanders lies in the shadow of the *Big Sleep*, a 400-foot titan of a climb that can be seen from every corner of the drainage. The East Fork sees little traffic, although hidden gullies and seeps abound in its quiet corners.

Together, the three drainages have more than 70 routes on everything from ephemeral smears to multi-tiered classics. The difficulties range from the low-angle gully of *Lower Green Sleeves* (WI 2) to the overhanging,

mixed nightmare of *Expanding Horizons* (5.11 WI 7). But before you swing a tool you must memorize the area's Golden Rules:

**RULE 1:  
DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT A  
FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE AND SHOVEL.**

The road to Hyalite does not get plowed, so a beefy four-wheel drive is a necessity. The first car up the road after the first big snow determines the nature of the ruts for the rest of the year. In years when that car is some gung-ho nut taking his Pinto for one last autumn spin, the squirrely back tires form endless S's, making the drive for the entire season a nauseating affair. Pray for straight ruts. Also, there is only one set of ruts, which means that two cars meeting involves one getting buried to let the other by, followed by a cooperative excavating project.

Also requisite for driving up to Hyalite is your ice-climbing survival kit, which should include chains for your car, headlamps just in case, blankets, and a tow rope for getting pulled out. By Christmas you should add a pair of skis to this kit because the road shuts down at the Hyalite Reservoir. You ski the final three miles to the trailhead.

**RULE 2:  
DON'T BE PUT OFF BY THE APPROACHES.**

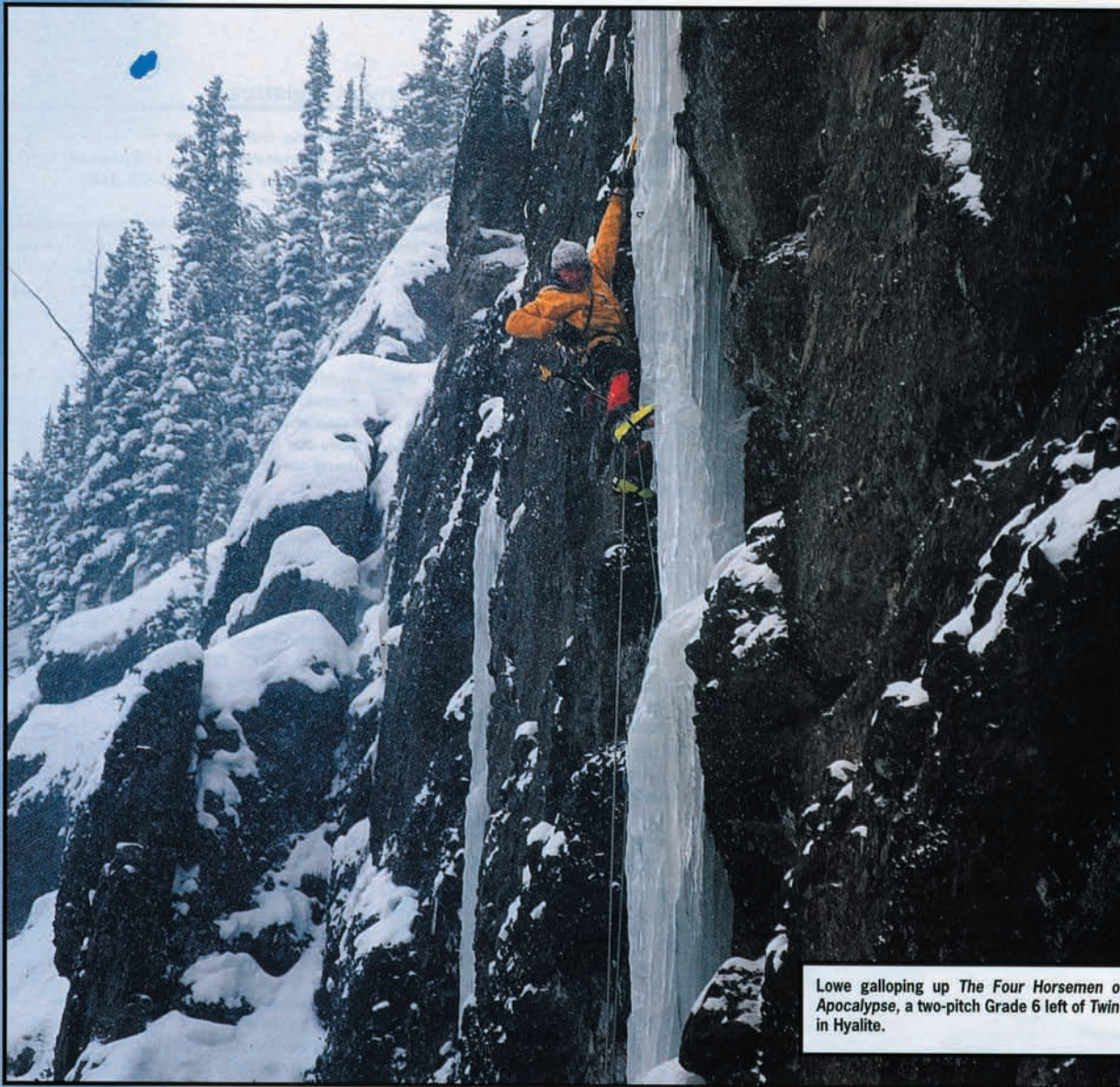
I don't know how many times I've sworn off climbing in Hyalite. After overshooting *Champagne Sherbet*, a classic WI 4 in the Flanders drainage, by three miles, I spent the whole day traversing back along the cliff band, thrashing over fallen logs and giant boulders and battling through waist-deep snow. That night I learned from my buddies that the climb was only 15 minutes from the car.

Every climber in Hyalite has a story like this. The trick is to line up the climb with the right gully and then not stray from that line. In other words, traversing is trouble.

On my next attempt, I spotted the correct gully from the trail and made a beeline to the base of *Champagne Sherbet*. Swirled red and blue from mineral seeps, the warm, forgiving 200-foot flow provided a sweet reward for the hard work.

**RULE 3:  
WATCH YOUR PRO.**

It is important to recognize the difference between Hyalite's two types of rock: andesite and crap. The andesite looks more uniform, has clean cracks and forms geometric



Lowe galloping up *The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse*, a two-pitch Grade 6 left of *Twin* in Hyalite.

patterns. *The Thrill is Gone* (5.8 WI 4) and *Black Magic* (5.10 WI 5/6) in Hyalite proper are excellent climbs on solid rock that protect relatively well with a standard climbing rack. If a wall is not andesite, it looks like a mosaic of mud balls and may crumble when touched. Routes like *The Matriarch* (5.10+ WI 7) are exercises in running it out on tied-off chicken heads and wishful piton placements. Of course, if you want to avoid the rock-quality issue altogether, plenty of great pure ice climbs here protect well with screws.

**RULE 4:  
DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE NAMES.**

Many of the climbs are unnamed. This

can be frustrating to locals and visitors alike, but reflects the attitude of the pioneers, including Jack Tackle and Pat Callis, who initially explored the area. They weren't doing new routes to put a bunch of names on their climbing résumés; they were just having fun. In fact, many of the early routes went unrecorded and unnamed, and some were thought to be first ascents years later. It would have been nice, though, if they had been given a quick tag like *Choss Heap 1* or *Good 1*, instead of *Unnamed 1*.

Ambiguity also surrounds the true names of climbs. In Flanders, for instance, there is the *Killer Pillar* (WI 5) a.k.a. *Tastes Like Chicken* a.k.a. *The Grand Chandelier* a.k.a.

... *Who Cares, It's a Great Climb*.

Armed with these four Golden Rules, you are ready to explore the world of Hyalite ice Well, almost. As you hang from one arm, the blood draining from your fingers and feet flooding into your mind, it's helpful to remember the fifth Golden Rule: Make like Alex and smile.

*Hans Saari lives in Bozeman and helped establish Rocket Boy (5.10+ WI 6+) in Hyalite Canyon. He was recently part of the expedition trying to make the first ski descent of the southwest face of Shishapangma, Tibet, on which Alex Lowe and Dave Bridges were killed. We left this article and layout unchanged.*