

Historic, daring climb on Yosemite's El Capitan draws a crowd

By Carmen George

YOSEMITE — Peering through binoculars at two rock climbers hanging from a massive chunk of granite more than half a mile high, the mother from San Carlos uttered, “risky, dangerous.”

Karen Morrill's reaction was a common one among throngs of spectators Thursday who stopped by the meadow beneath [Yosemite National Park's](#) famous El Capitan to watch Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson try to complete what is widely considered the most difficult free climb ever attempted.

The spectacle on the Dawn Wall, rising about 3,000 feet above Yosemite Valley, has been drawing more attention after the climbing duo completed pitch 14 last week, considered one of the most difficult of the climb's more than 30 sections. On Thursday afternoon, Jorgeson was resting and is still trying to push past pitch 15, which Caldwell completed Saturday, said Tom Evans, who runs [EICap Report](#), a climbing blog.

Watching them from below, Morrill's husband was in awe. “Fifty years ago I climbed a little bit and was scared to death at a couple hundred feet above the ground,” Chris Morrill said. “I don't know how you do that.”

His wife shared the fascination. “Also, can you imagine sleeping on these things,” she said, referring to portaledge, which are hanging tents used by big-wall climbers. “That is so scary. Also, you realize they go to the bathroom, pee and poo, in bags. I mean, that's some weird stuff.”

Nearby, Steve Provazek of San Jose was captivated for another reason. “It's fascinating to see this kind of focus. ... That drive and commitment. ... It's really impressive.”

His wife, Jane, asked two Coarsegold men in lawn chairs nearby, equipped with three bottles of wine in a cooler, “Do you think they are crazy?”

One of them, Christian Van Allen, answered with a smile, “It's not for me. One time when I was in high school I climbed up to my girlfriend's bedroom window. That's about as high as I ever want to go.”

Evans, a climber who's spent years documenting El Cap climbs through his camera lens, has heard it all before. But to the experienced climbers, he says, there's nothing weird — or risky — about the trials and tribulations that accompany an ascent into the sky.

“They're not thrill seekers, not at all,” Evans said of Caldwell and Jorgeson. “They know what they are doing — they have an objective. They are focused ... It has nothing to do with adrenaline, that's a common misconception.

“How much adrenaline can you stand? Can you have an adrenaline rush for 20 days? Your body would burn up. That's not what it's about for climbers. It's about the satisfaction of knowing that you, a humble, small human being, can survive and enjoy spending day after day on a huge rock. It's you against nature, sort of, but you're not against it. Like one of the old English climbers used to say, ‘Have we conquered the enemy? None but ourselves.’ ”

Caldwell and Jorgeson began climbing the Dawn Wall late last month and are aiming to finish sometime next week.

The duo are free climbing, which means they only use their hands and feet to get up the rock, but have ropes attached as a safeguard to prevent them from falling to their deaths.

The climb is no easy feat, said Erik Sloan, a Yosemite climber and owner of [YosemiteBigwall.com](#). “I've done this (climb El Capitan) 87 times and I've never free climbed it.”

Sloan said 99.5% of El Capitan climbers use some kind of special equipment to aid them. Free climbing is “way harder.”

Sloan was among about 20 people in the meadow around noon Thursday watching the climbers. Since Caldwell and Jorgeson started their climb, he’s climbed up to them twice to bring food. His gifts included chocolate chip cookies and a bottle of whiskey.

Climbers from all over have been flocking to Yosemite this winter to watch the pair ascend the Dawn Wall. Sloan said climbers are “stoked” and the vibe is kind of like “Team U.S.A.” because the duo are American.

“People are just excited that Tommy is finally finishing his project,” Sloan said. “They know how good he is.”

Evans called Caldwell, who is also a young father and husband, the “most respected free climber to climb on El Capitan.”

“He’s extremely humble. If you just happened to sit down with Tommy at the cafeteria and chatted with him for a while, you’d never know what he does and how important he is to the climbing community.”

Specators gazing up at climbers on El Capitan is a normal sight in Yosemite National Park year-round, but park spokesman Scott Gediman said Caldwell and Jorgeson’s climb has certainly increased those usual crowds.

“It’s exciting,” Gediman said of their climb. “The history of climbing is really important to Yosemite in that it is really linked to the park’s history.”

Gediman said some of the world’s most famous climbers — including Warren Harding, Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard and Tom Frost — all started their climbing careers scaling Yosemite’s famed granite walls. Unlike the first ascents of those early climbers, Caldwell and Jorgeson now have an extensive support team that hauls up food and water, and their climb is being closely followed on social media, with live tweets and Facebook posts from the Dawn Wall.

Evans said the climb is a project more than six years in the making. The climbers have been working on the climb in sections, he said, but this is the first time the pair has attempted it in one continuous push from the valley floor. They’ve climbed mostly at night because colder temperatures help the rubber on their shoes stick on the tiny holds and because warmer temperatures cause their palms to sweat.

And while Caldwell and Jorgeson’s climb — now about halfway done — is far from over, the success of a climb doesn’t typically hinge on a couple of holds, Evans said. It hinges on character, he said, and “these guys got it, that’s for sure.”

“This story accentuates the positive values that we all hope that everyone has: Courage, determination, tenacity,” Evans said of their Dawn Wall climb. “That’s why this is a great story. It’s a couple of little men and El Capitan and they are up there willing to take risks, they are willing to throw their bodies and get trashed, live weeks at a time without any modern comforts — that’s about the human spirit and that’s really important, I think, in this day and age.

“If more people would be more worried about the human spirit and determination and courage, the world would be a lot better place.”

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