

Places

Crowded Crags? Here's What You Can Do About it.

Either be mad about overcrowding or try these productive actions.

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“Oh there’s people going to *Sunseeker*!? Let’s go too!” said a Boulder, Colorado, climber to the eight friends he was touring around the alpine boulders of Mount Evans. Over Memorial Day weekend, a few Front Range boulderers hiked three miles to *Sunseeker* (V12) at Area B in Mount Evans. They had dug out a snow landing for

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the three climbers
r, throwing
below the landing,

jockeying for a chance to climb, rapid-firing the problem, and ignoring the patient climbers who had already been there. The crowding resulted in the all too common sour moods and low-level seething.

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“It’s estimated there are 8 million climbers in the country, whereas when I started climbing, we might have been measured in the hundreds of thousands,” said 35-year climbing veteran Erik Murdock, the Interim Executive Director of the Access Fund. “There’s obviously exponential growth.” According to the *Climbing Business Journal* 36 new gyms opened in the US in 2022 and 56 opened in 2021. Nearly 600 gyms exist in the US and thousands of new climbers have walked through those doors. The increased numbers have made circling the gym parking lot, waiting in line for a turn on a climb, and dealing with excessive bros par for the course. The crowded problem expands to more than just bad parking. Busy climbing areas means displaced climbers push into the wilderness farther, thus creating larger concerns. As Murdock says, “It’s a safety issue and it’s an environmental issue and it’s an access issue and it’s a recreation experience issue and it’s also a wilderness character issue.”

Newer, naïve climbers often ignore the existence of crowds, both inside and outside. They don’t know that the packed crags were initially quiet, solitary escapes. Conversely, saltier climbers complain about the traffic while sitting in it. They wax about the good old days while being obtuse to the fact that by being there, they are part of the problem as well. Ignorance and complaints won’t change crowding. And the increased number of climbers affects more than our ability to sneak in a turn on the pink gym project at 7 p.m. on a Tuesday night. Crowds can be fatal.

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In early July of 2022, two dozen climbers including a helmeted Anna Leikvold climbed on the routes at Wizard's Gate on Twin Sisters Peak, just south of Estes Park, Colorado. A party above them on a four-pitch 5.11, *The Arrival*, dislodged a rock, which struck and killed Leikvold. First ascensionist Bob Siegrist then removed all 50 bolt hangers from *The Arrival* to prevent people from climbing above others and pulling off more loose rock. The number of people at the crag resulted in the unfortunate fatality. There's a need to prevent these accidents.

In late February, the National Park Service wrote on their Instagram page, "To avoid crowds, visit areas that are less crowded." This simple advice works well. Most climbers make their destination choices based on a combination of distance, difficulty, quality, and safety. Simply hiking 15 miles to climb 5.14 chossy, death routes guarantees an empty crag. However, it's a toss-up between what's more fun—hiking to a too hard guillotine or hanging with 15 people and their dogs at a roadside grease pile. Most people choose the latter. To abate this, advocacy groups like the Access Fund have enacted climbing stewards in popular areas like Yosemite, Indian Creek, the New River Gorge, and soon the Red River Gorge to educate climbers on how to handle themselves at the crag and help mitigate overuse. However there's still significant traffic. Land managers have dealt with crowded crags through closures, fees, and other restrictions. Avoiding these barriers and additional hurdles can be addressed by individuals taking the responsibility of traffic and learning to deal with crowds.

When arriving at a crowded crag, one of the best options is to leave. Unfortunately, many climbers don't realize that a crag's actually crowded and this naivety can be dangerous as in the case at *The Arrival*. Both the people climbing above other parties as well as the parties below need to use sound judgment. They need to ask themselves how likely it is that there's loose rock in the area, how many climbs are there given the people, and what factors could cause dangerous situations. Siegrist provided some advice on arriving at crags with a lot of people: "If the crag is too busy with climbers, especially inexperienced and sketchy climbers, don't hesitate to relocate to another area. Many weekend days can be busy, so if you want to climb one of the great multi-pitch climbs, try to do so on quiet days with limited climbers on the single pitch routes below." A quick glance at a guidebook, a scroll through any number of online climbing guides, or a short discussion with people at the base can usually provide enough information for another nearby climbing option. Further, climbers should be cognizant of the time they spend on the wall so as to avoid congestion. Being prepared for an opportunity on a wall and then moving confidently will expedite things.

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Beyond moving fast, climbing during odd hours helps to avoid traffic jams. My twenty five years of anecdotal evidence from across the US suggests that most climbers climb in the gym on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. They show up early to the boulders or crag on Saturdays, start later on Sundays, and leave later that afternoon. This makes gym climbing perfect for sunny weekends, as no one will be pulling on plastic. Hiking farther, climbing at harder crags, going to less popular areas, and being willing to risk more will guarantee shorter lines. Additionally, climbing super early in the morning or very late in the evening outside can be two other great options. Climbing at these times often involves a bit more effort, but it makes navigating crowds easier, and also the temps are better for performance.

A final option is to realize, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. And that means not just channeling some inner Toxic

Tom, plugging in your headphones, and ignoring the people around you. This may cancel out the guy next to you screaming beta, but it also hinders your ability to communicate with your belayer. Finally it can flush your send down the drain when the song suddenly switches to Taylor Swift Anti-Hero and she starts singing “It’s me, hi, I’m the problem, it’s me.” It’s too on point. As is trying to vibe other climbers out through rude or malicious behavior. These attitudes only produce long-term animosity and harm. A better option for joining a crowd is engaging with them and adjusting your expectations accordingly. Talking to the people at the crag and politely sorting the queue for the climbing. Perhaps one of the best parts about COVID was when people walked up to other groups at the crag and politely asked if they could join them. The discussion helped alleviate tension and facilitated people climbing together. While this slows everyone’s climbing down and requires a significant amount of communication, it can help alleviate congestion, it fosters a better community, and the other folks at the crag will be cheering you on. Accepting the crowd can be a great chance to exchange beta, to meet new partners, and to use the crowd’s energy to send.

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Ultimately, we can’t control crowd behavior. Despite the thousands of climbing areas in the US, only a few get climbed at. Avoiding people at the crags comes to individual decisions. Be aware of crowds, avoid them if possible, and if you can’t, communicate so everyone can have a good, responsible, and safe time. If everyone acts accordingly, then the crowding problem could be prevented.

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James Lucas (<https://www.climbing.com/byline/james-lucas/>)

James Lucas spends half his time working in his cubicle obsessing over climbing and the other half outside obsessing about climbing.

