

The Best Extreme Routes in the Lakes

I feel that I ought to start an article like this with a Public Information Warning. Please advise anyone around you: partners, children, pets that you may be likely to strike out in anger and/or frustration at any moment. For my own safety I have bolted the doors and shuttered the windows. My aim here is to consider the vast array of fabulous climbing, in the extreme grades, that we have available to us in the Lakes and to condense that down to a select list of, in my opinion, the absolute best. I have only included routes up to E6, with just a couple at E7 and omitted anything harder. My justification for this is simply that there seems little point in taking up valuable space with routes that have had only one or two ascents and will be of limited value to all but a very small minority. Along the way I will consider the subjective nature of star-rating for routes; the differences in personal preference; and the challenges faced whilst creating a new version of Lake District Rock, our selected climbs guide to the whole area.

At the end of 2018 I was doing very little climbing, I had been focussing nearly all my energies on cycling for the past few years. This was a time when I was giving up full-time work with the intention of being able to continue competing in cycling time-trials and get back into more regular climbing. As it turned out, the climbing took over completely, the bikes have been consigned to the spare room and indeed the time trial bike has been sold. At just this time I, along with others, received a timely email from His Eminence Al Phizacklea with an attached list of all the 3-star extremes in the current edition of Lake District Rock (LDR). There are 250 of them. This was perfect timing. Not only was I immediately drawn into a ticking exercise to see how many I had already done but then had a ready-made tick-list to work on over the coming months and years. What this means is that I have sought out and climbed many “3-star routes” all around the Lakes over the past few years and that has given me a good impression of the relative merits, or not, of these routes. Some were great, some were okay and yet some were pretty poor.

Star ratings for routes are important. They give the visitor to an area a good indication of which routes to choose from if they want to make the most of their time, particularly if that is limited. This information is no different to the other facts that we present climbers with. We wouldn't tell them that Gable Crag faces south, Pillar is a 20-minute walk, or that Shepherds Crag is 100m high. It would be wrong and misleading. It is also why we try to get grades right. It is not clever to sandbag visitors with an inaccurate grade – it could be downright dangerous. The same goes for stars. It is important we are clear about how good an experience the visiting climber can expect. When we write guidebooks, we are not writing them for ourselves or for locals. Our primary audience is the visitor, and they want to know what they can expect. Just because the first ascent was by a well-known historical figure, or that the route was an incredible achievement for the time does not make the climbing experience any better. We also have to consider the current state of the route. If it is overgrown and dirty, it might not be as good as it used to be. There is an argument for giving more stars to encourage traffic, but that is disingenuous and will only lead to disappointment and a mistrust of the guide. Eagle Crag in Borrowdale is a good example of

this. Sadly, the once excellent routes on this imposing crag have become particularly dirty and so the quality of climbing has to be downgraded.

A challenge faced with creating a district-wide selected guidebook is the context. Whilst a route in, say the Duddon, might be worthy of 3 stars compared to other routes in that valley/guidebook, when compared to routes across the whole district it is being compared to the likes of Scafell, Dow, Gimmer etc. The danger with this is that there would be no 3-star routes in the Duddon or outlying crags, which seems a little unfair – it all just needs adding into the mix. With this in mind let me return to my recent, frenetic pursuit of all those stars in the current LDR. There are a number in the selection that, in my opinion do not deserve to be on the list. The routes on Yew Crag Knotts probably don't deserve 3 stars in the Buttermere guide, let alone LDR. The routes on Upper Heron Crag provide great fun at a lovely location but they cannot compare with even the second-rate routes on some of the other, more significant crags thereabouts. The routes at Bramcrag Quarry, might be enjoyable and accessible but they will never equate to the great routes that the Lake District tradition has been built upon.

One phenomenon I have noticed is that first ascensionists of hard routes nearly always give their new creations 3 stars. Maybe they are great routes but often I think they are rating their experience, which is greatly heightened by the effort required to succeed.

Having now climbed over 200 of the 250 3-star extremes in LDR, I have whittled that list down to the best 100. In a few cases I have had to rely on the views of others as there are a handful of routes that I have not got round to climbing yet – something I hope to put right this coming year.

The List

Route	Crag	Grade	Route	Crag	Grade
Paladin	White Ghyll	E3 5c	The Rack, FF Finish	Reecastle Crag	E2 5c
Cruel Sister*	Pavey Ark	E3 5c	The Bludgeon	Shepherds Crag	E1 5b
Sixpence	Pavey Ark	E6 6b	Grand Alliance *	Black Crag	E4 6a
Astra	Pavey Ark	E2 5c	Prana	Black Crag	E3 5c
Fallen Angel*	Pavey Ark	E4 6a	Raindrop	Black Crag	E1 5b
Whit's End Direct	Gimmer Crag	E1 5c	Hell's Wall	Hell's Wall	E6 6c
Equus*	Gimmer Crag	E2 5c	Wheels of Fire	Hell's Wall	E4 6a
Gimmer String	Gimmer Crag	E1 5b	Aphasia	Sergeant Crag Slabs	E2 5b
Riboletto	Cambridge/North	E4 6a	The Voyage	Goat Crag	E3 5c
Abraxas	Dow Crag	E3 5c	Tumbleweed	Goat Crag	E2 5c
Isengard/Samba Pa Ti	Dow Crag	E2 5b	Praying Mantis	Goat Crag	E1 5b
Side Walk*	Dow Crag	E2 5b	Footless Crow*	Goat Crag	E6 6b
Nimrod**	Dow Crag	E1 5c	Mirage	Goat Crag	E5 6b
Tumble	Dow Crag	E4 5c	Bitter Oasis*	Goat Crag	E4 5c
Woodhouse's Arete	Dow Crag	E6 6b	Rigor Mortis	Castle Rock	E2 5c
The Shining Path	Dow Crag	E5 6b	Triermain Eliminate	Castle Rock	E2 5b
Stage Fright	Hodge Close	E6 6b	The Medlar	Raven, Thirlmere	E4 6a
Ten Years After	Hodge Close	E5 6a	Close to the Edge	Raven, Thirlmere	E4 5c
Wicked Willie	Hodge Close	E5 6b	Gates of Delirium*	Raven, Thirlmere	E4 6a
Malice in Wonderland	Hodge Close	E3 5c	Das Kapital	Raven, Thirlmere	E6 6b
Gormenghast**	Heron Crag	E1 5b	Blitzkrieg	Raven, Thirlmere	E4 6a

The Red Edge	Esk Buttress	E1 5a	Totalitarian**	Raven, Thirlmere	E1 5b
Humdrum	Esk Buttress	E3 5c	Empire	Raven, Thirlmere	E3 6a
The Central Pillar**	Esk Buttress	E2 5b	Marble Staircase	Iron Crag Upper	E4 6a
The Cumbrian*	Esk Buttress	E5 6a	Hiddenite	Iron Crag Upper	E2 5c
Shifter	Burnt Crag	E3 6a	Western Union	Iron Crag Lower	E6 6b
Burning Desire	Burnt Crag	E5 6b	Phoenix in Obsidian	Iron Crag Lower	E7 6b
Central Buttress	Scafell Crag	E1 5b	Vlad the Impaler	Dove Crag	E7 6b
The White Wizard	Scafell Crag	E3 5c	Fear and Fascination	Dove Crag	E5 6a
Ringwraith	Scafell Crag	E6 6b	Bucket City	Dove Crag	E6 6b
The Nazgul*	Scafell Crag	E3 5c	Fast and Furious/FFF	Dove Crag	E5 6b
Saxon*	Scafell Crag	E2 5c	Internal Combustion	Raven Crag, Thresh	E6 6b
Edge of Eriador	East Buttress	E4 6a	Top Gear	Raven Crag, Thresh	E4 6a
Shere Khan*	East Buttress	E5 6a	GTX	Raven Crag, Thresh	E3 5c
Lost Horizons*	East Buttress	E4 6b	Running on Empty	Raven Crag, Thresh	E4 6a
Borderline	East Buttress	E7 6c	Bloodhound	Gouther Crag	E2 5b
Ichabod**	East Buttress	E2 5c	One Step Beyond	Gouther Crag	E3 6a
Lord of the Rings*	East Buttress	E2 5b	The Exorcist	Armathwaite	E4 6a
Innominate/ Sepulchre	Kern Knotts	E1 5b	Phantom Zone/Cem Head	Chapel Head Scar	7b+
Incantations	The Napes	E6 6b	Mid-Air Collision	Chapel Head Scar	7b
Supernatural	The Napes	E5 6a	Wargames	Chapel Head Scar	7b
The Tomb	Gable Crag	E2 5c	Super Duper Dupont	Chapel Head Scar	7c
Sarcophagus	Gable Crag	E3 5c	Unrighteous Doctors	Chapel Head Scar	7c+
Fanghorn	Boat How Crag	E3 5c	Trilogy*	Raven, Langdale	E5 6a
Tapestry	Pillar Rock	E4 6a	R'n'S Special*	Raven, Langdale	E5 6a
The Phillistine	High Crag	E1 5b	Valhalla	Great Blake Rigg	E1 5b
Dreaming of Red Rocks	St Bees	7a	Younger Than Y'day	Great Blake Rigg	E4 6a
Kidnapped	Lower Falcon	E2 5b	Nagasaki Grooves	Great End	E4 6b
The Niche	Lower Falcon	E2 5c	Life in the Fast Lane	Hodge Close	E5 6b
White Noise	Reecastle Crag	E3 5c	Phoenix	East Buttress	E2 5c

* Extreme Rock selection

** Hard Rock selection

The last 7 routes in the list either weren't in the LDR selection or were not awarded 3-star status. The two hugely significant publications by Ken Wilson: Extreme Rock and Hard Rock - recently updated by Ian Parnell, contain a selection of routes across the extreme grade. Most of those are included in this list, with a few exceptions. From Extreme Rock I have omitted Fine Time, Holocaust and Eastern Hammer – all fabulous routes but they didn't make the cut. From Hard Rock I have left out North Crag Eliminate and Deer Bield Buttress as both of these have fallen down. Both of their replacements in the recent new edition of Hard Rock are included – Nimrod and Totalitarian. Also missing is Extol simply because it is vastly overrated and doesn't deserve to be in the list.

What about the next step? Which are Best in Class? This is even more subjective. The selection is very much more personal. They are based on my own experiences on the days I did the routes. Everyone will have their own favourites.

Best in Class			Runners-up		
Route	Crag	Grade	Route	Crag	Grade
Gormenghast	Heron Crag	E1	Nimrod	Dow	E1
Central Pillar	Esk Buttress	E2	Saxon	Scafell	E2
The Voyage	Goat Crag	E3	The Nazgul	Scafell	E3

Top Gear	Raven, Thresh	E4	Tumble	Dow	E4
R'n'S Special	Raven, Langdale	E5	Fast & Furious + FFF	Dove Crag	E5
Woodhouse's Arete	Dow	E6	Stagefright	Hodge Close	E6

"What about Lord of the Rings?" I can hear echoing up and down the fells and dales of the county. Firstly, I haven't got round to doing it yet but more importantly, whilst I am sure it is a magnificent day out, I wanted everything on this particular list to be more readily accessible for everyone who is climbing at that grade. This is clearly not a static list, even for myself as I hope to be tackling some absolute belters in the future that may well prove to dislodge the current contenders from their lofty positions.

So, there you have it. Take it or leave it. If this list provokes some discussion in the huts or pubs of the Lakes I will be delighted. Maybe see it as an ultimate Lakes tick-list. At the time of writing, I still have 10 routes on the list to climb but hope to whittle that down over the coming year. Somebody may have already done them all. Others may come up with their own list and share their thoughts with the rest of us. I hope you take this in the spirit intended and enjoy the debate.

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Guidebook Writer: Eastern Crags (2011), South Lakes Limestone (2012), Lake District Rock (2022)