

# **YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK**

**El Capitan**

May 2011

A full-page photograph of a climber on a rock overhang in Yosemite. The climber is a shirtless man with dark pants, hanging from a thin rock ledge. The background shows a vast mountain landscape with granite cliffs and a clear blue sky. The Half Dome is visible in the distance.

A new generation of superclimbers is pushing the limits in

# Yosemite. Daring. Defiant. Free.

By Mark Jenkins  
Photographs by Jimmy Chin

With no rope to save him,  
Dean Potter scales a route on  
Glacier Point called Heaven.

PHOTO: MIKEY SCHAEFER





Despite the obvious risk, the ascent on this regular Northwest Face route on Half Dome is a welcome reprieve for Alan Reinhold, who became a rock star at age 21 when he first climbed the same route without a rope.

NGM.COM MAY 2011

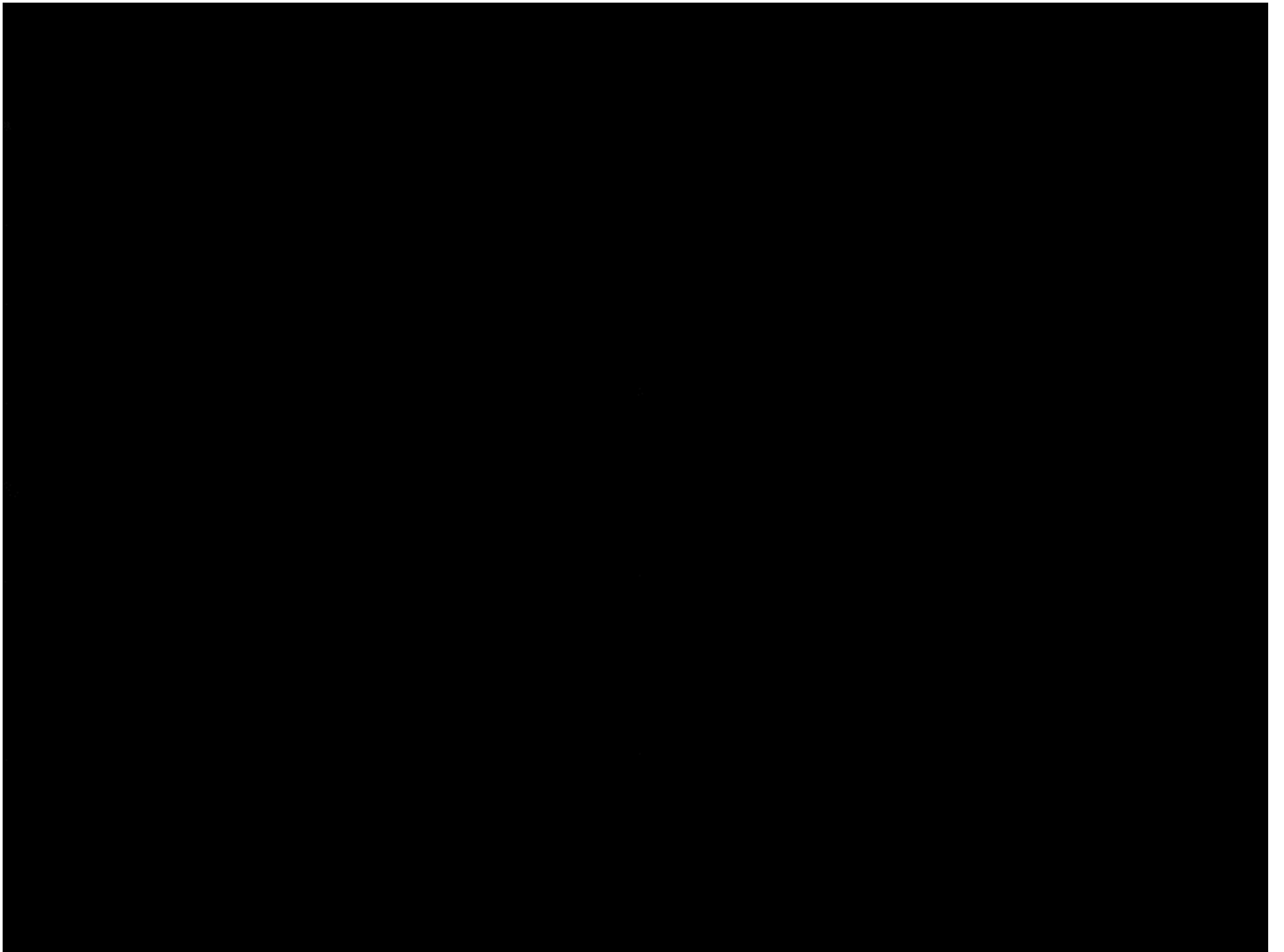
# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

## ABOVE Yosemite

Like Never Before

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## El Capitan

### SCALING THE WALL

El Capitan's 2,916 vertical feet of granite have made Yosemite an international proving ground for climbers for decades. Climbers spend months—even years—creating new routes up cracks in the wall to the summit. On a peak-season day 60 climbers may dot El Cap, many on the most famous route, the Nose.

#### EL CAP MILESTONES

The tallest wall in the valley was the last to be tackled. It seemed impossible to climb. Twenty-three people have died trying. As gear and climbing styles have evolved (far upper right), speed has become the new frontier.

1902 Climbers go to 400 feet to identify a ponderosa pine for the Park Service. The next year, some from that group climb the 1,200-foot East Buttress.

1908 First major ascent: Warren Harding and team climb the Nose in 47 days over a 17-month period.

1911 Second major ascent: The Salathé Wall is climbed in six stages over nine days by Royal Robbins, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt.

1944 First route on the Southwest Face. The North America Wall is climbed by Royal Robbins, Vern Chouinard, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt.

1968 First single-climber ascent: Royal Robbins spends nine days on the Mitre Wall, a route created three years earlier.

1972 Five routes are created in one season, including Cornice, the first established by a single climber.

1976 The Nose is climbed in less than 24 hours by Jim Bridwell, John Long, and Gary Westberg.

1989 First free climb of a major route: Todd Skinner and Paul Pione scale the Salathé Wall.

1990 First climbing of two El Cap routes in one day: Dave Schultz and Peter Croft go the Nose and Salathé Wall.

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1993 Three El Cap routes are climbed in one day by Hans Rasmussen and Steve Schneider.

2006 The nose is free climbed in 12 hours by Tommy Caldwell and Beth Rodden.

2010 The fastest route, the Prophecy, is free climbed by Leo Houlding and Jason Pickles, who spent nine years creating it.

2016 Dean Potter and Sean Leary climb the Nose in ten hours, 45 minutes, 45 seconds.

Pioneers are

Clean climbing era (minimal permanent hardware to avoid damaging the rock)

Free-climbing and speed-climbing era



#### CLIMBING STYLES

**Aid (specialized)**  
Nylon strap ladders attached to placed hardware support the climber's weight.



**Free (most popular)**  
Harnessed to a rope to haul falls, climbers use hands and feet to move up the rock.



**Free solo (rare)**  
Climbing without ropes; falls are usually fatal. No major El Cap route has been free soloed.



Most

Reliance on gear

Least







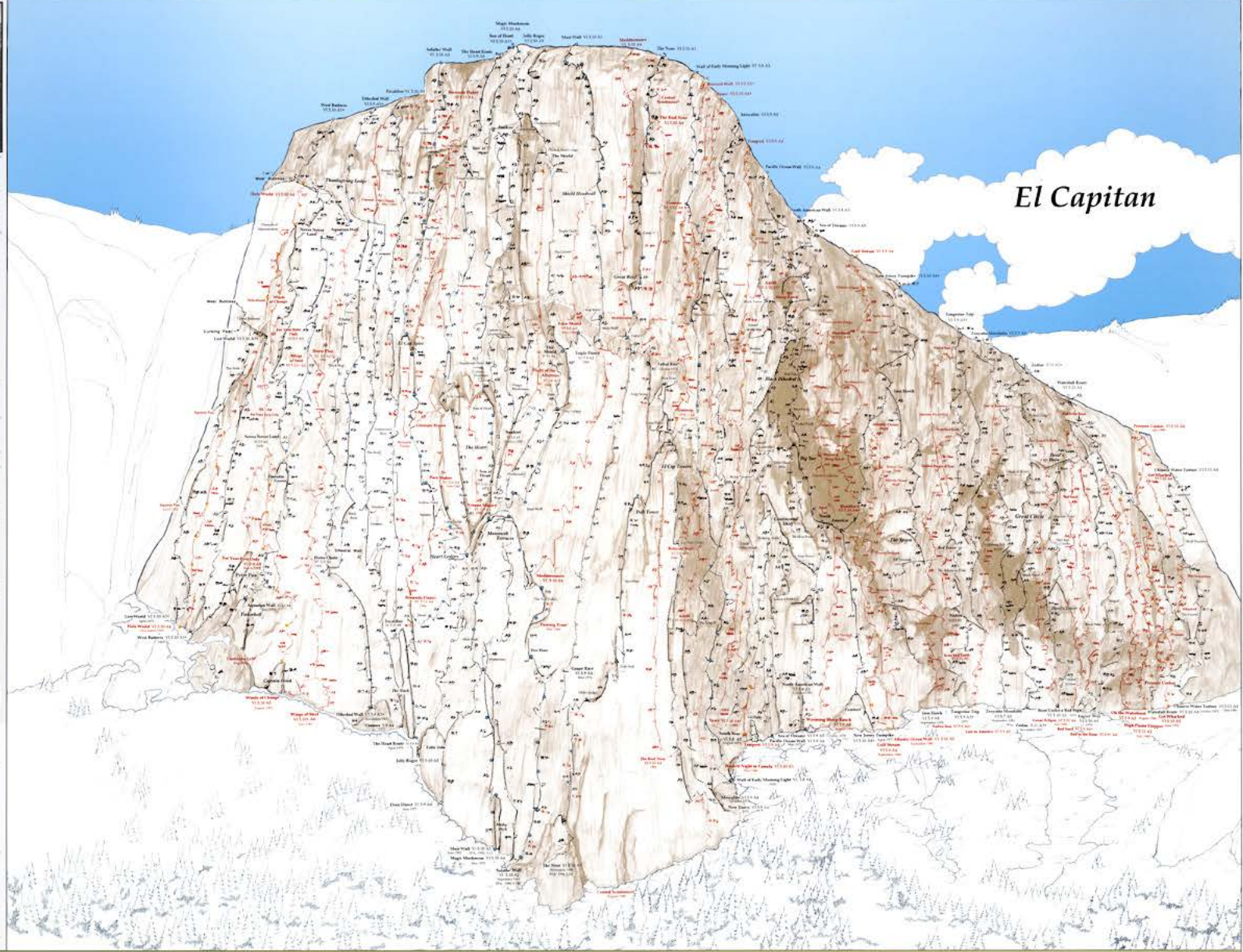


## El Capitan

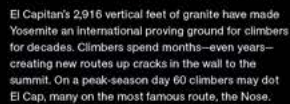
*Yosemite National Park*

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### The Routes:







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1958: First major ascent: Warren Harding and team climb the Nose in 47 days over a 17-month period.

**1961** Second major ascent: The Salathé Wall is climbed in two stages over nine days by Royal Robbins, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt.

1984 First route on the Southwest Face. The North America Wall is scaled by Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt.

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**1972** Five routes are created in one season, including Cosmos, the first established by a single climber.

1975. The Nose is climbed in less than 24 hours by Jim Bridwell, John Long, and Billy Westbay.

**Nose**  
elevation:  
1 ft (1,250 m)

1988 First  
of a major  
Todd Skir  
Paul Piana  
the Salath

Free climb:  
Route:  
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Scale:  
Wait:

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and

First climbing	1959
El Cap routes	became
day. Dave	free
tz and Peter	A year
do the Nose	free
relative Will	route

**1993** Lynn Hill becomes first to climb the Nose in one day. Later she climbs the route in 23 hours.

2005. The  
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hours by T.  
Caldwell and  
Rodden.

2010. The new route, the Prophecy, is free climbed by Leo Houlding and Jason Pickles, who spent nine years creating it.

2010: Dean Potter and Sean Leary climb the Nose in two hours, 36 minutes, 45 seconds.



**Pickover and**

Clean-climbing era (minimal permanent hardware to avoid damaging the rock)

Free-climbing and speed-climbing are

**Climbing routes**  
A selection of the more than 100 established routes is shown here.

— Featured in article  
— Other

**Aid (specialized)**  
Nylon stirrup ladders attached to placed hardware support the climber's weight.

Most • 

**Free** (most popular)  
Harnessed to a rope to halt falls, climbers use hands and feet to move up the rock.

Reliance on gear

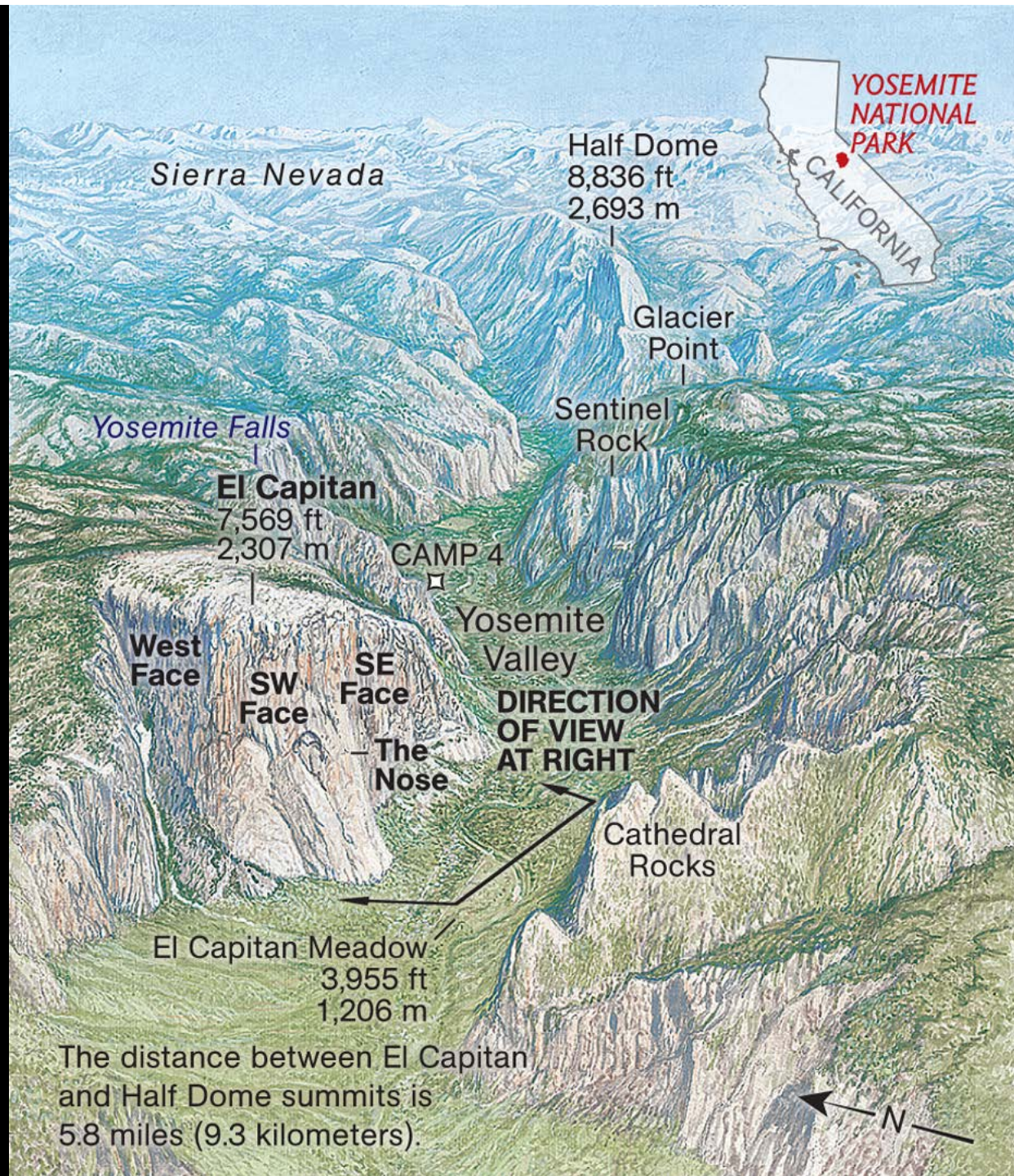
A line drawing of a person climbing a vertical rope. The climber is wearing a helmet and a harness. They are using a rope that is anchored to a point above them. The climber's left leg is extended upwards, and their right leg is bent. Their arms are reaching up, holding onto the rope. The rope is shown as a single line that loops around the climber's waist and extends upwards. The background is plain.

**Free solo (rare)**  
Climbing without ropes;  
falls are usually fatal.  
No major El Cap route  
has been free soloed.

..... • Least







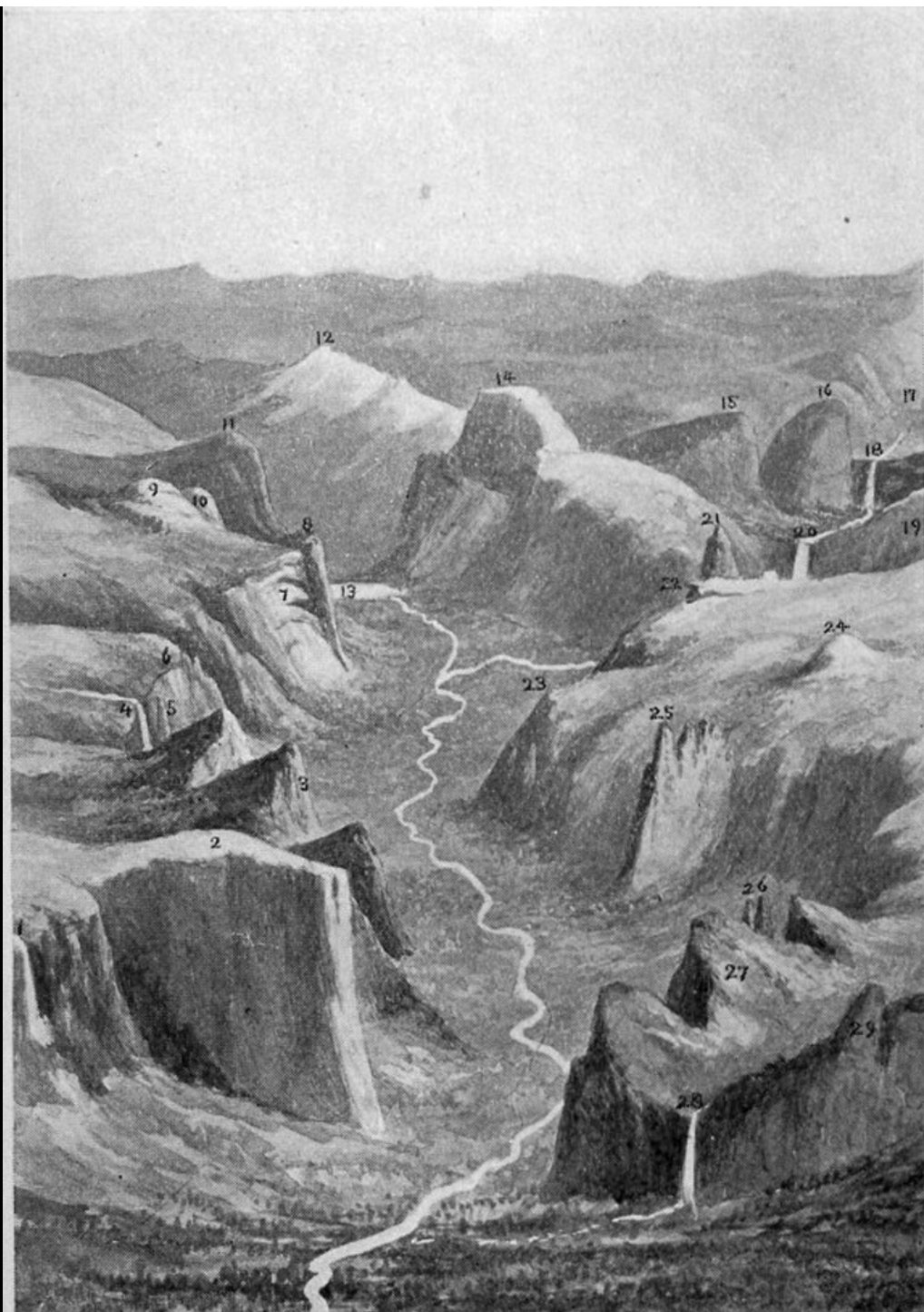




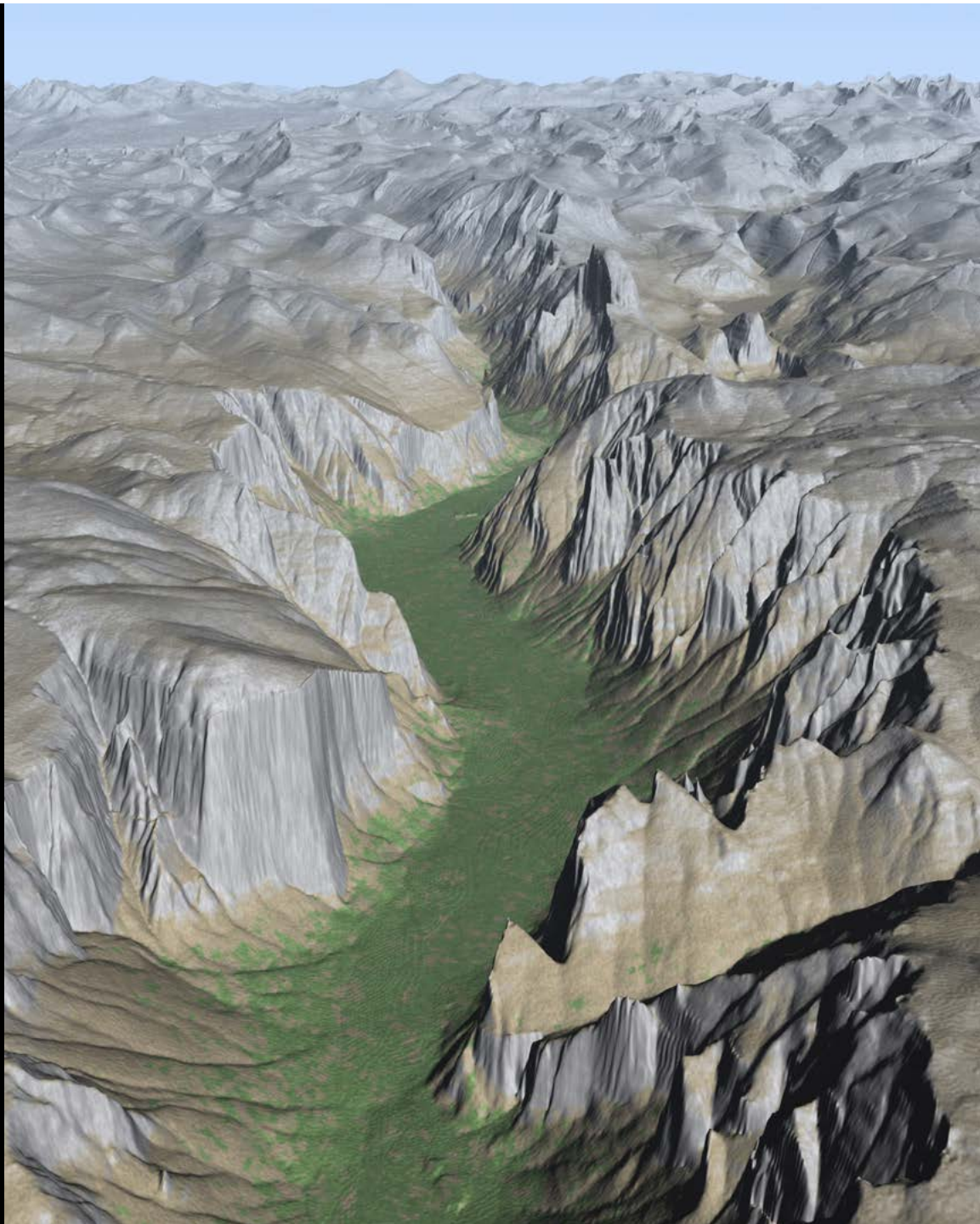




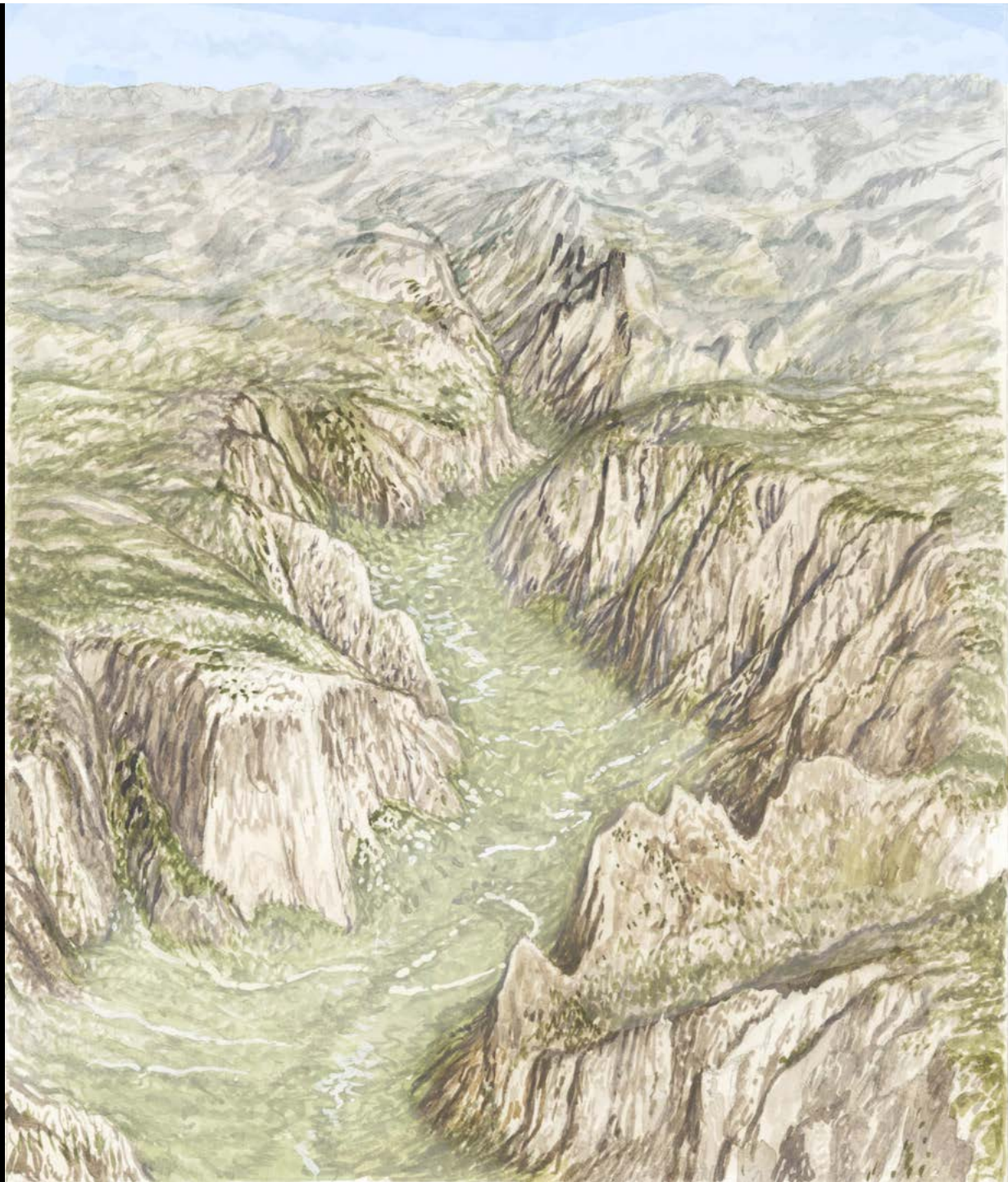




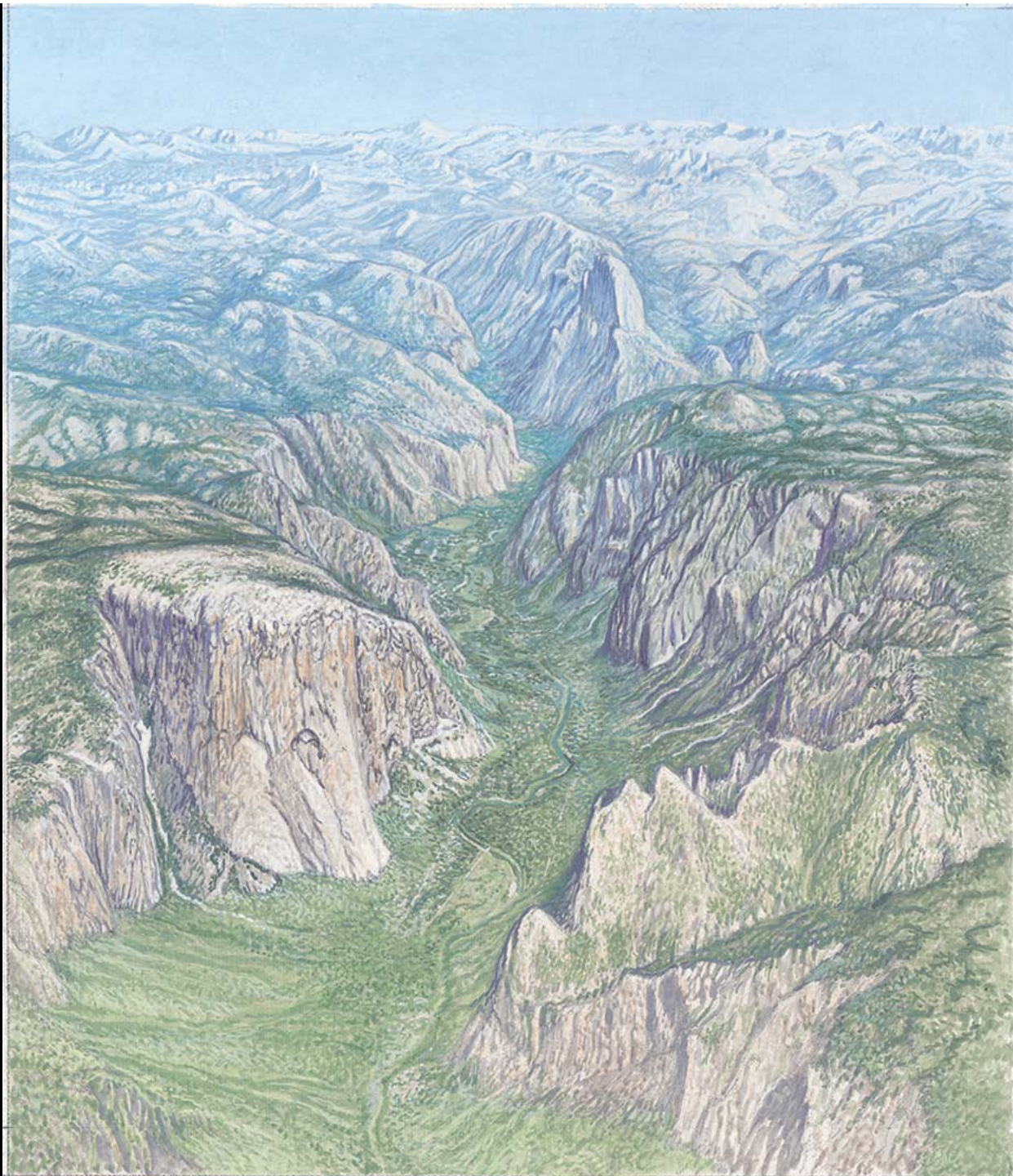




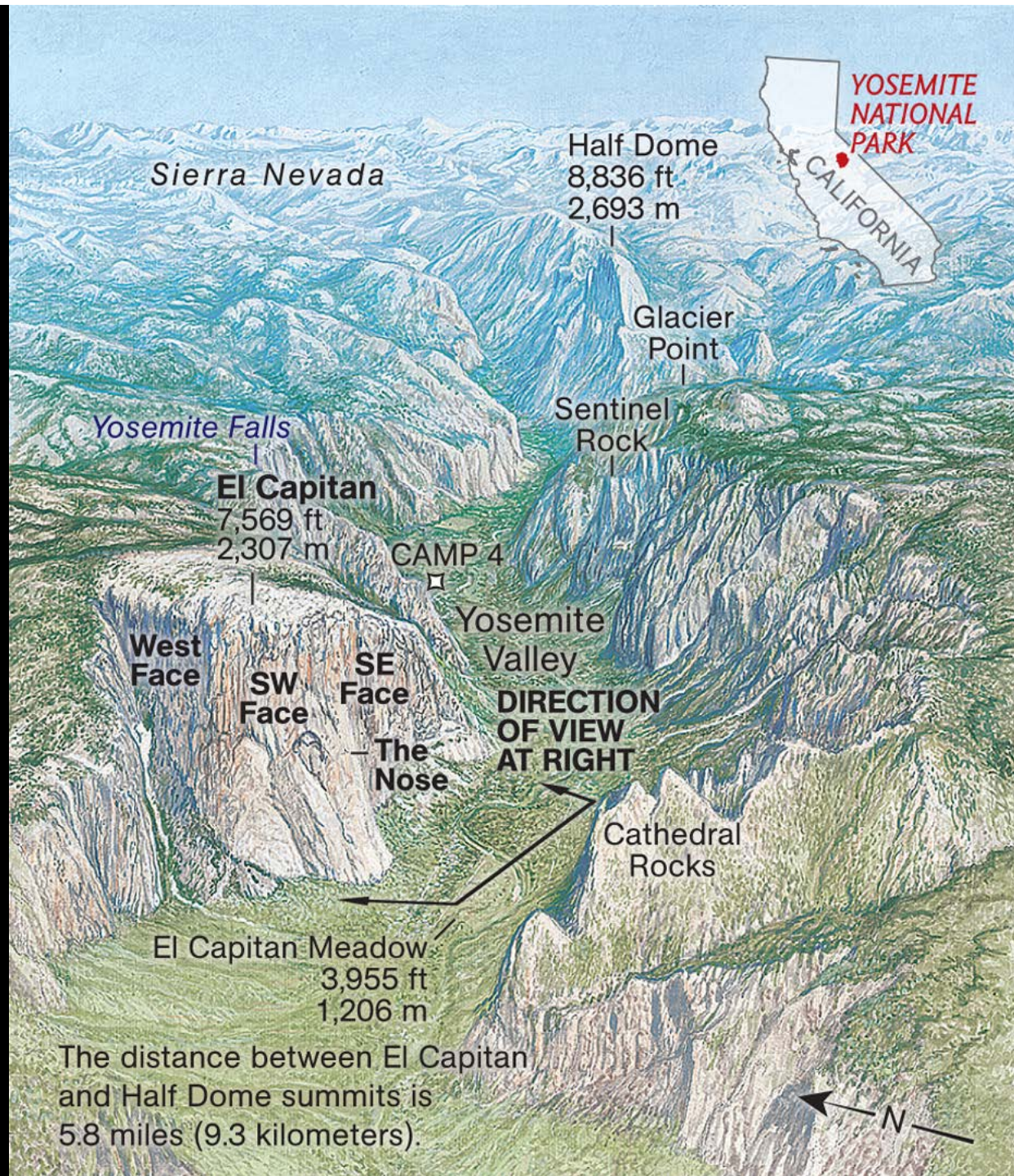




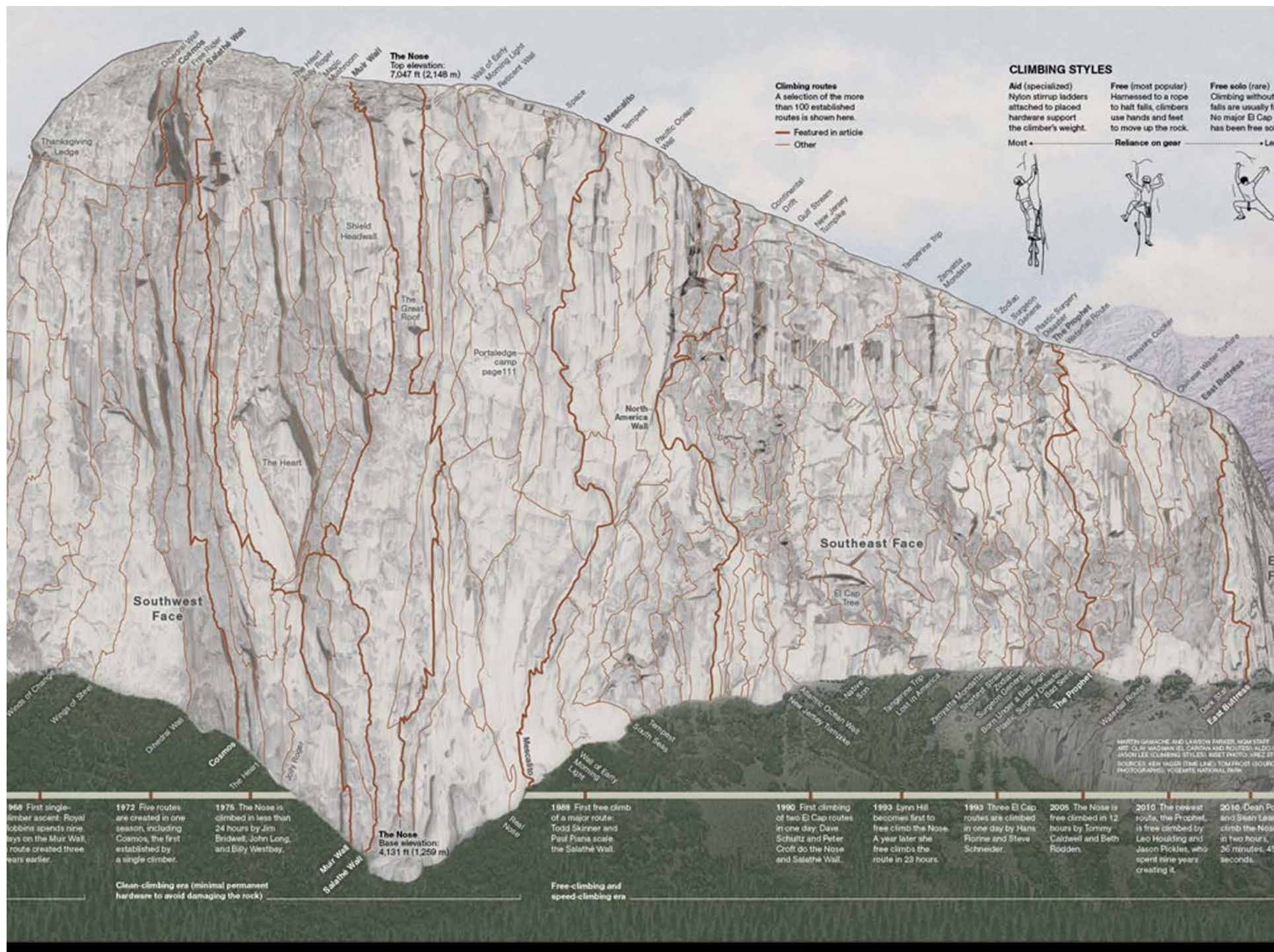




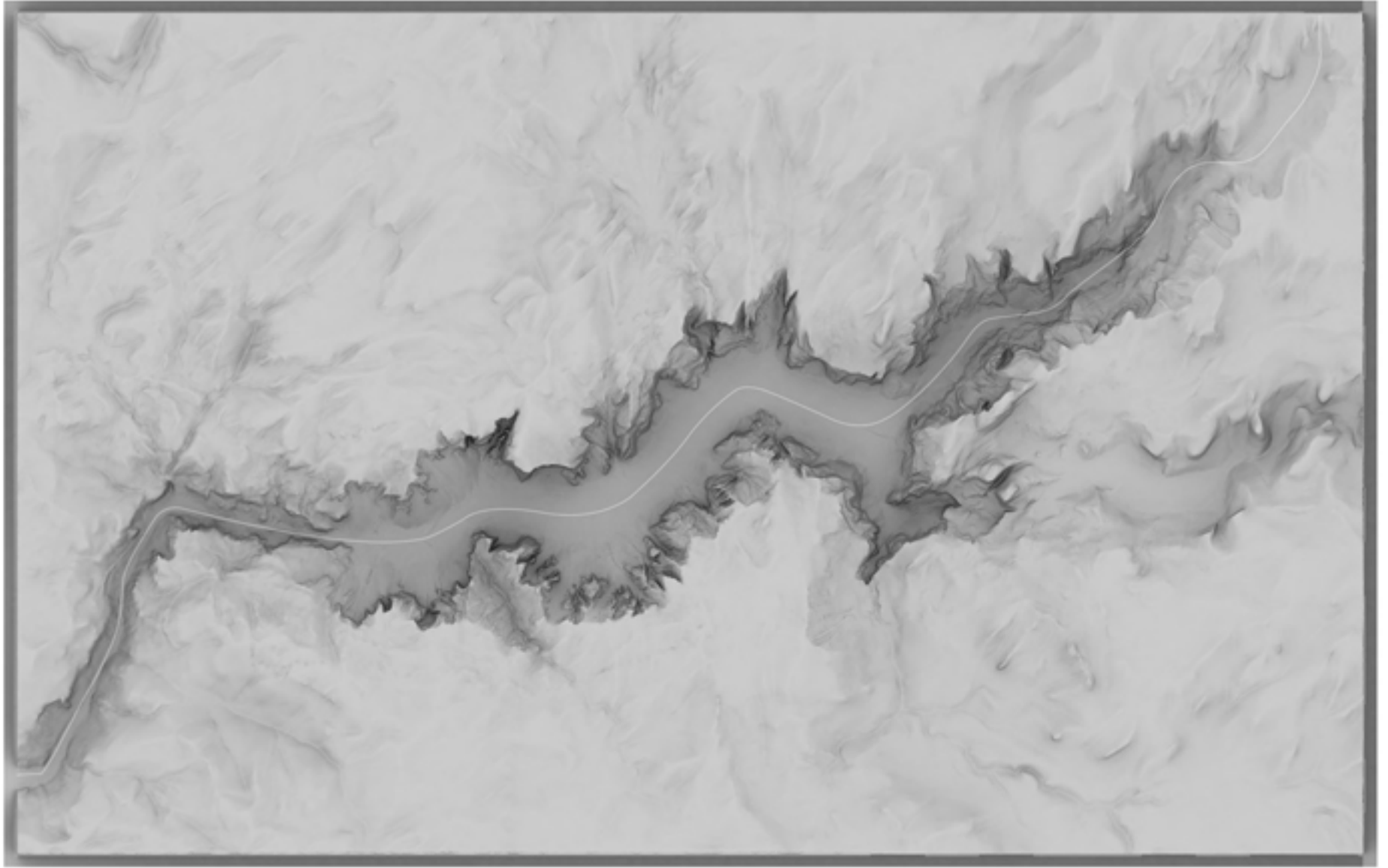




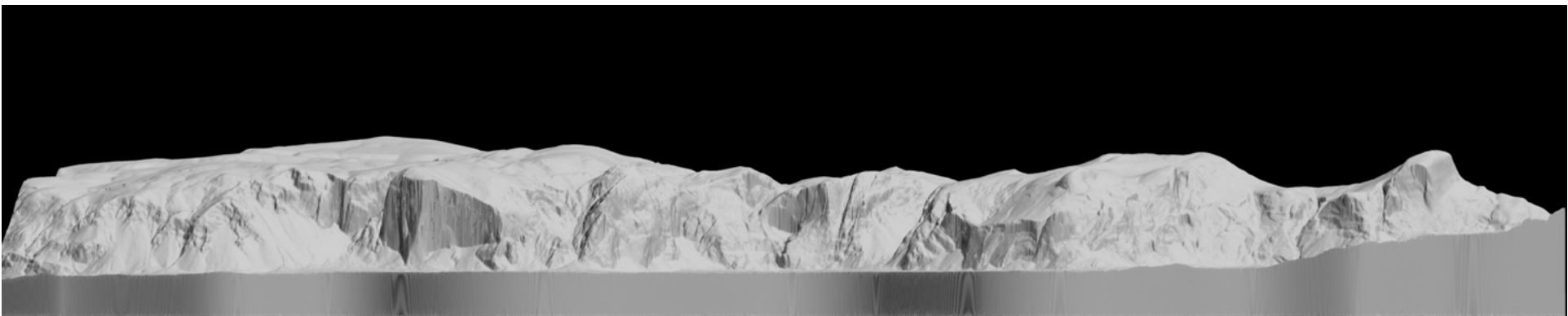
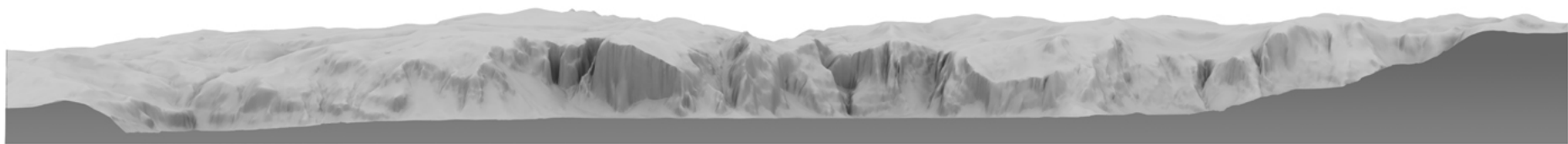
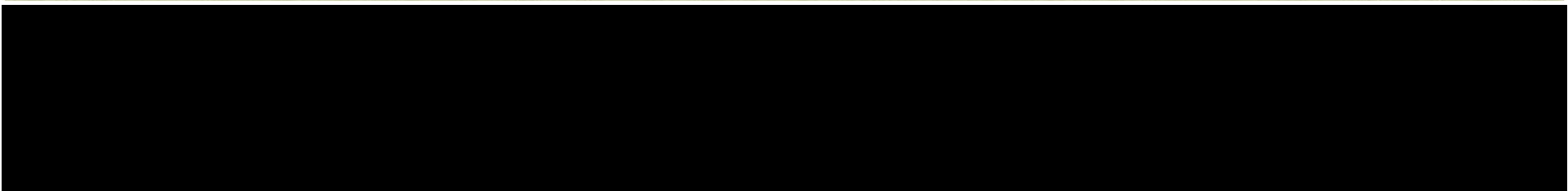
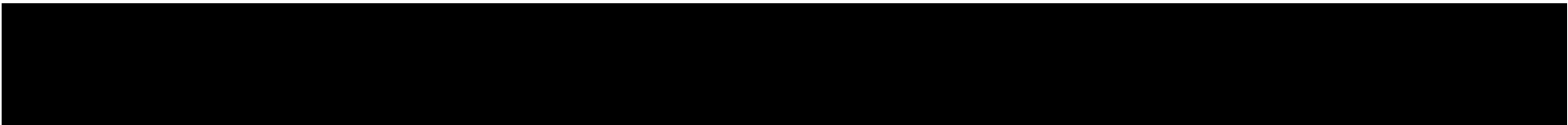








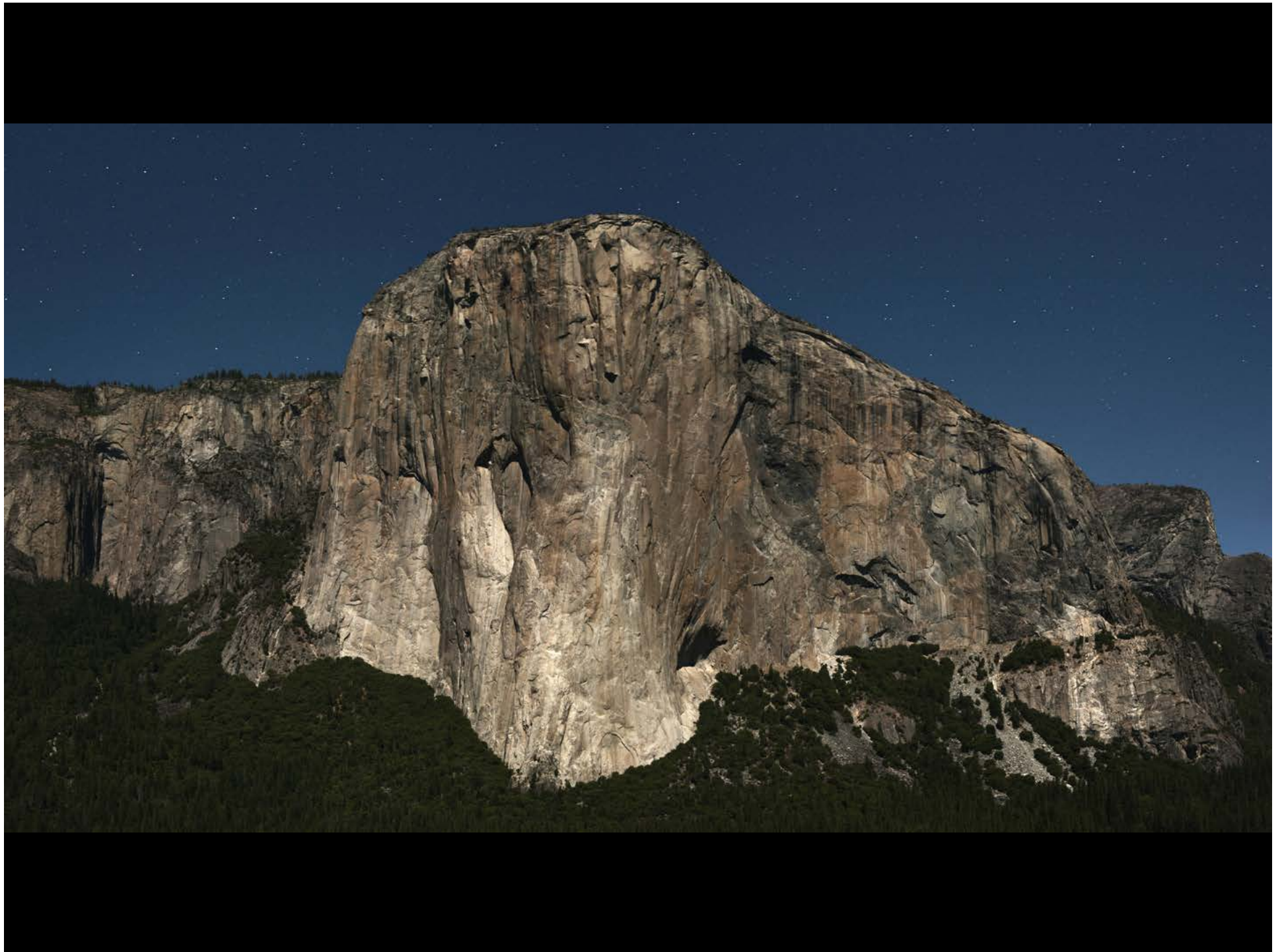




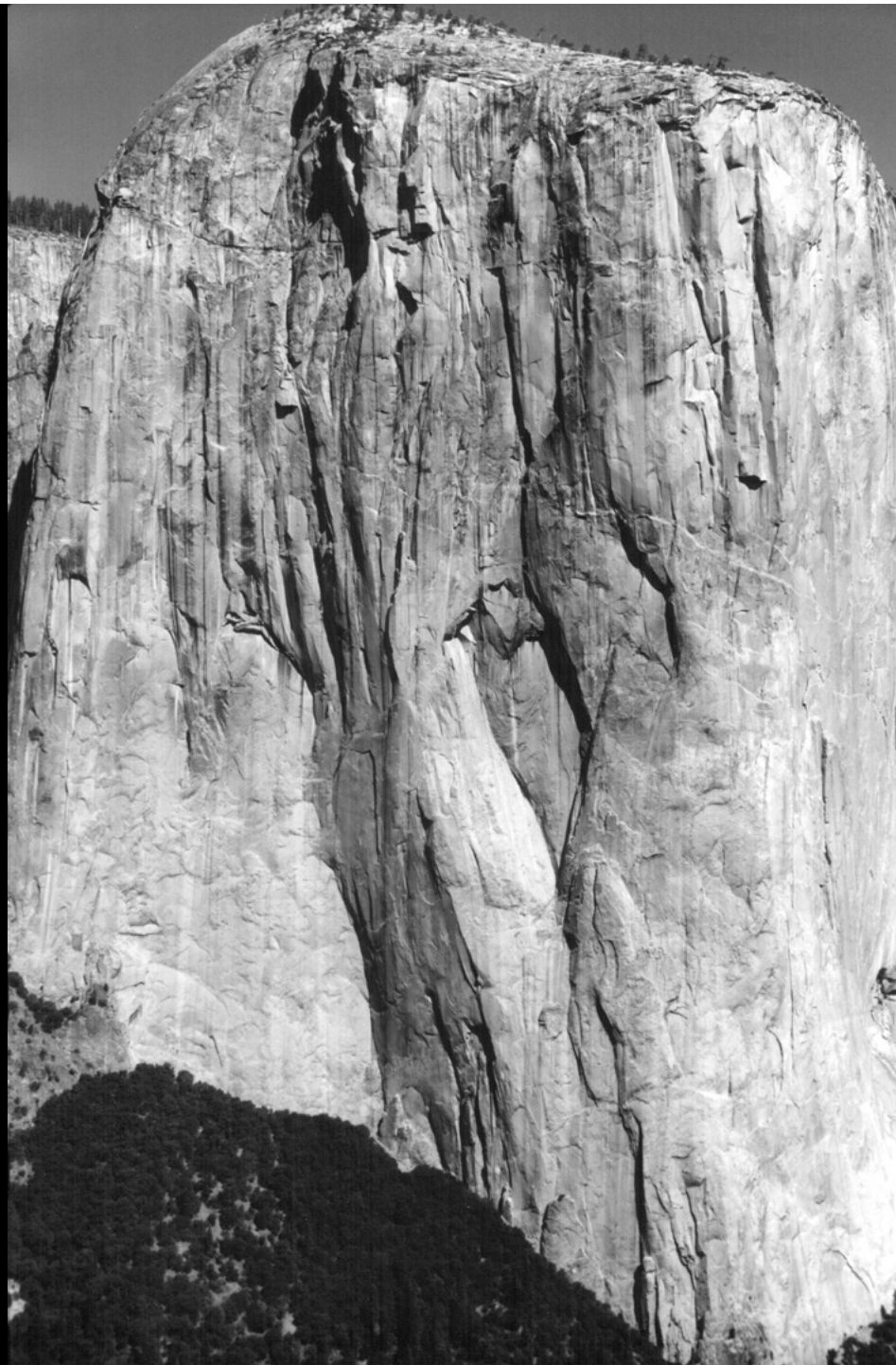




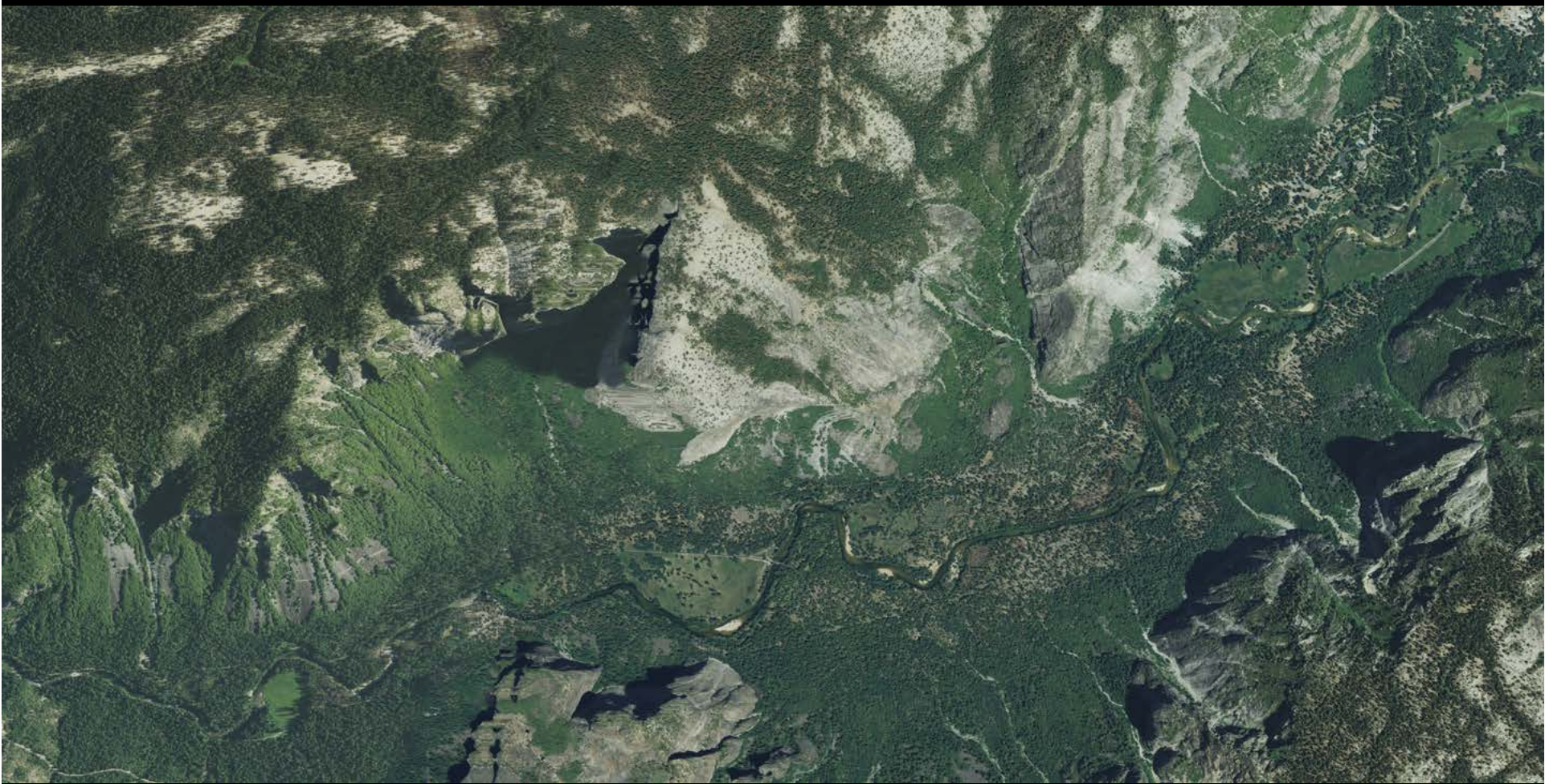




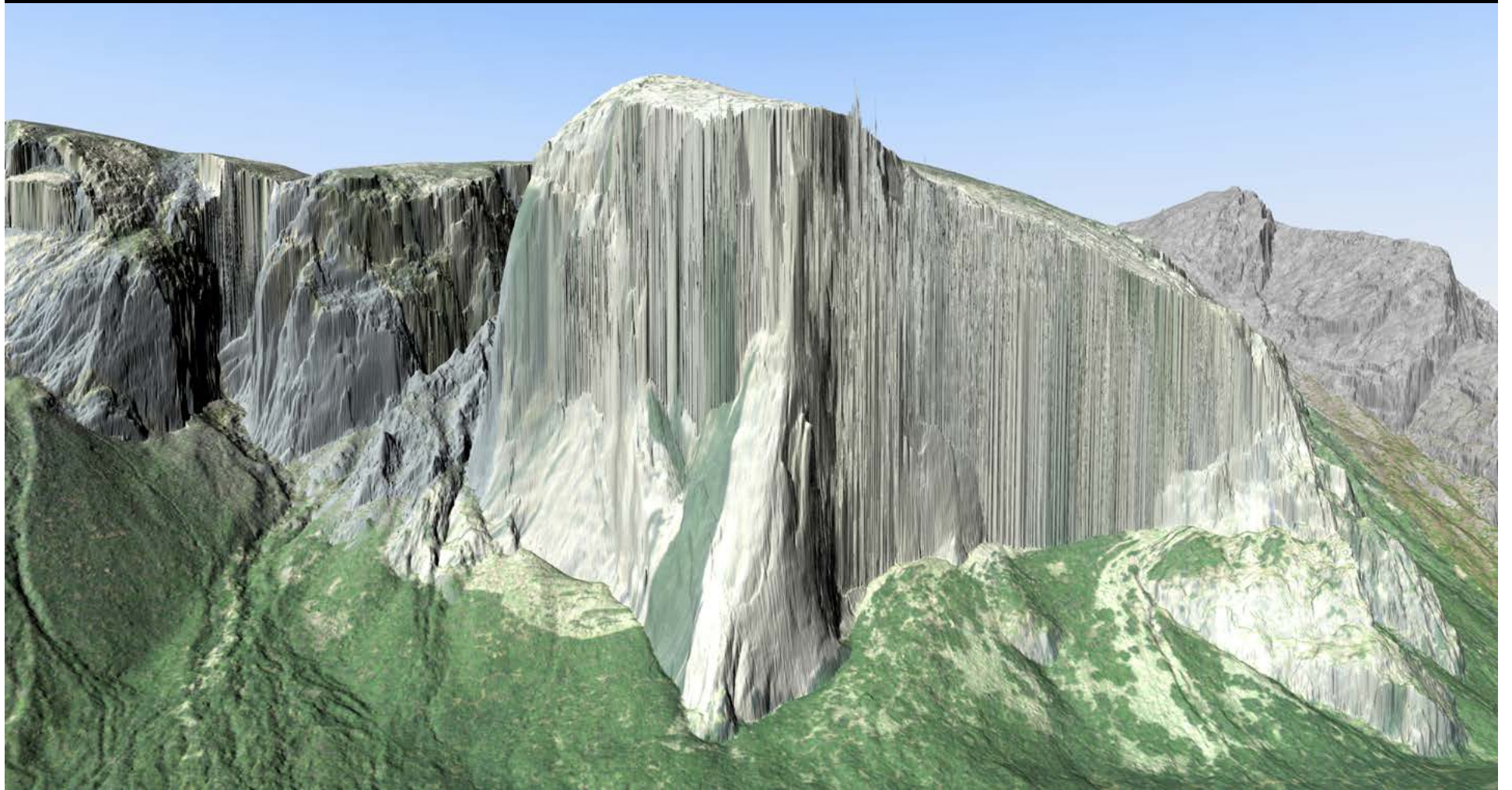












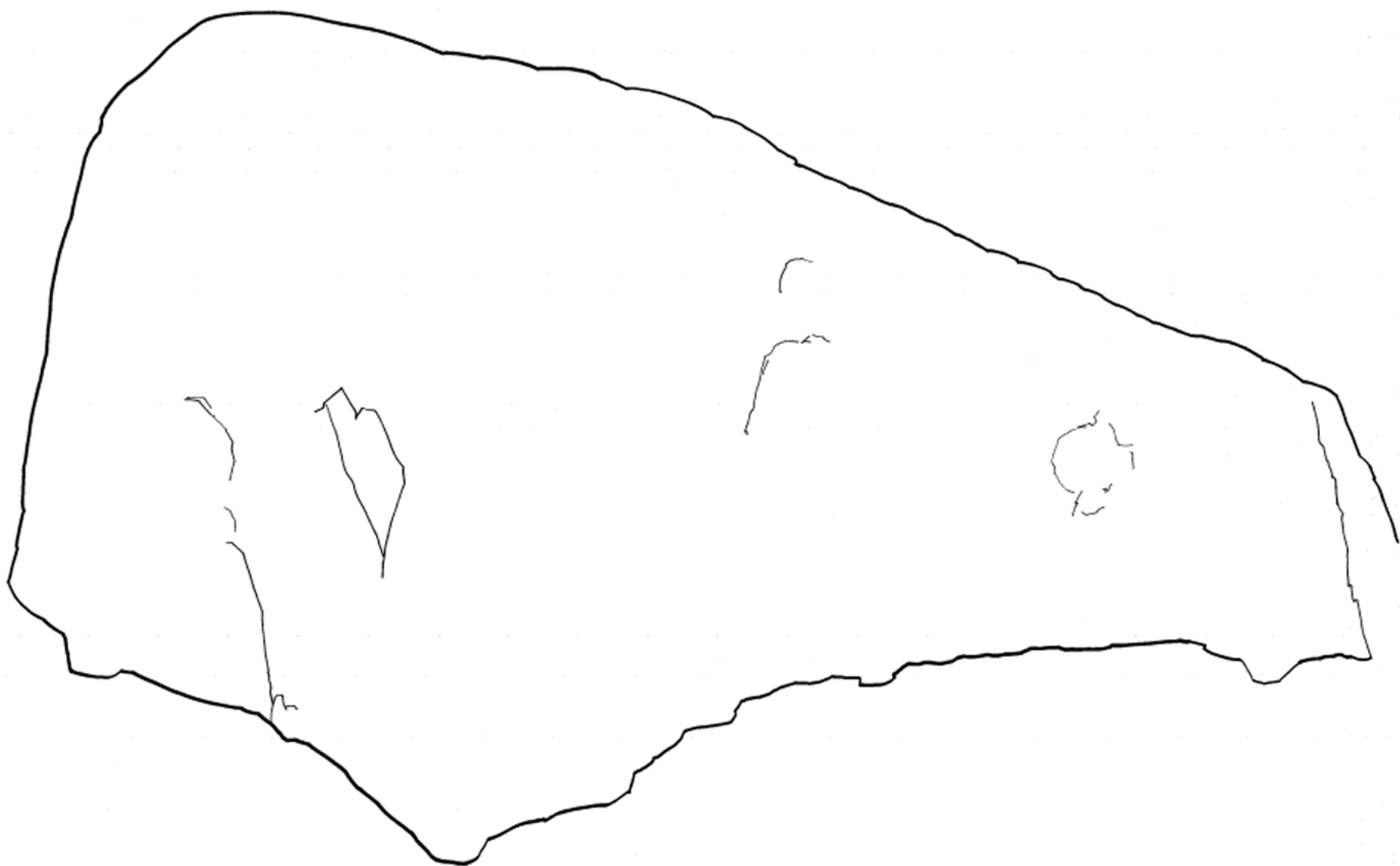




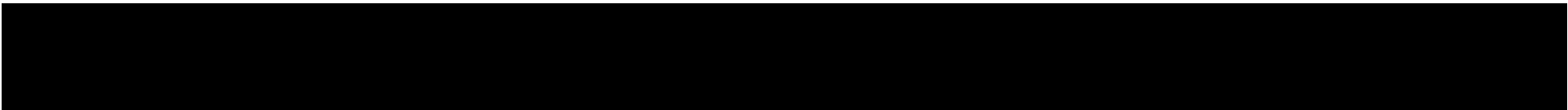
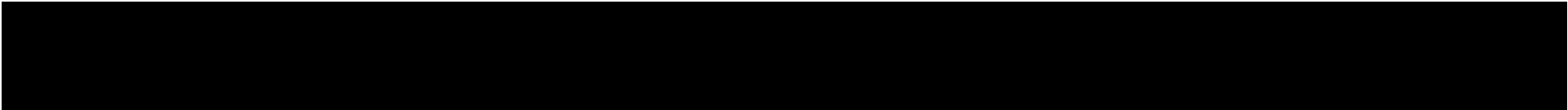












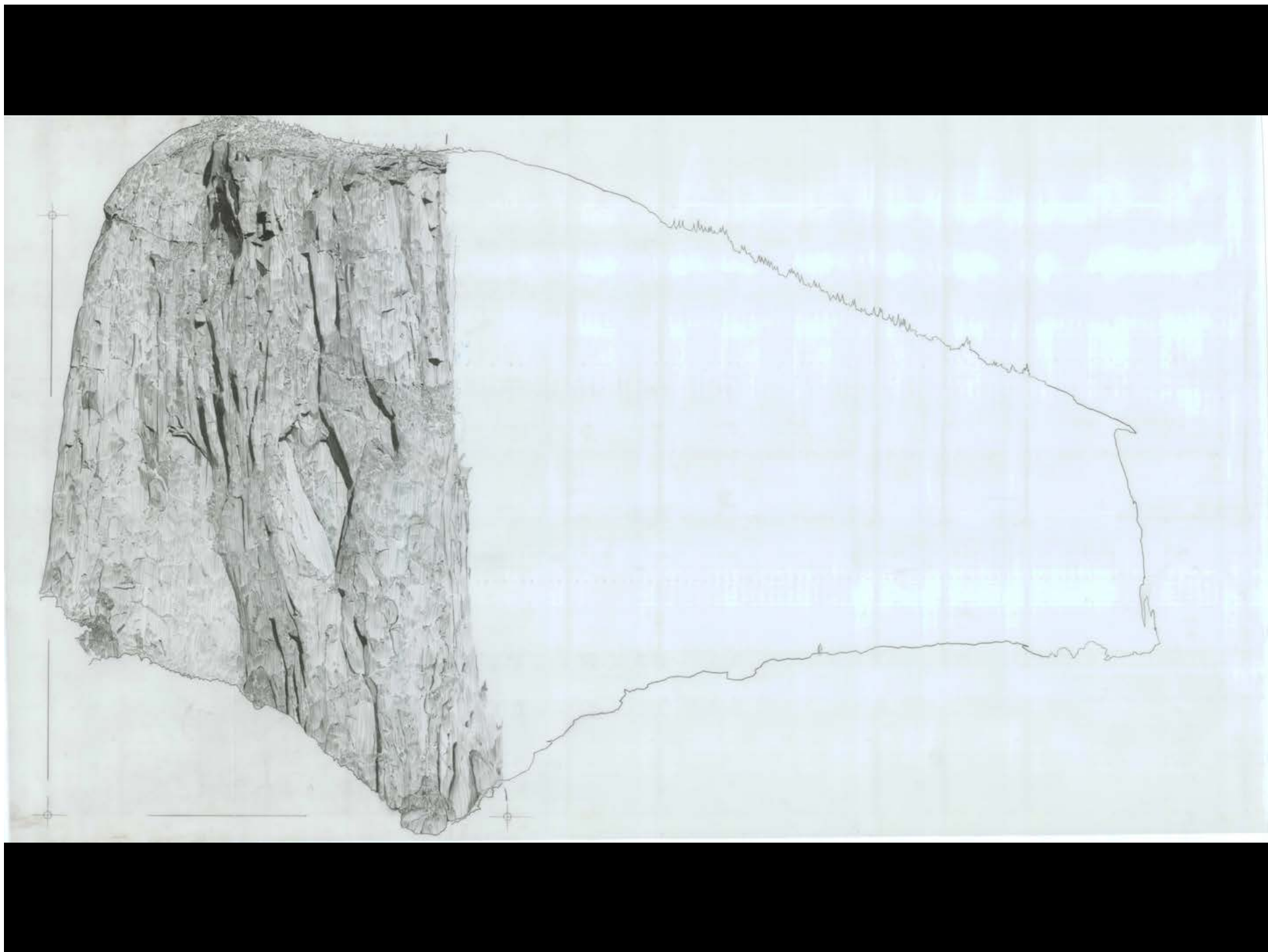








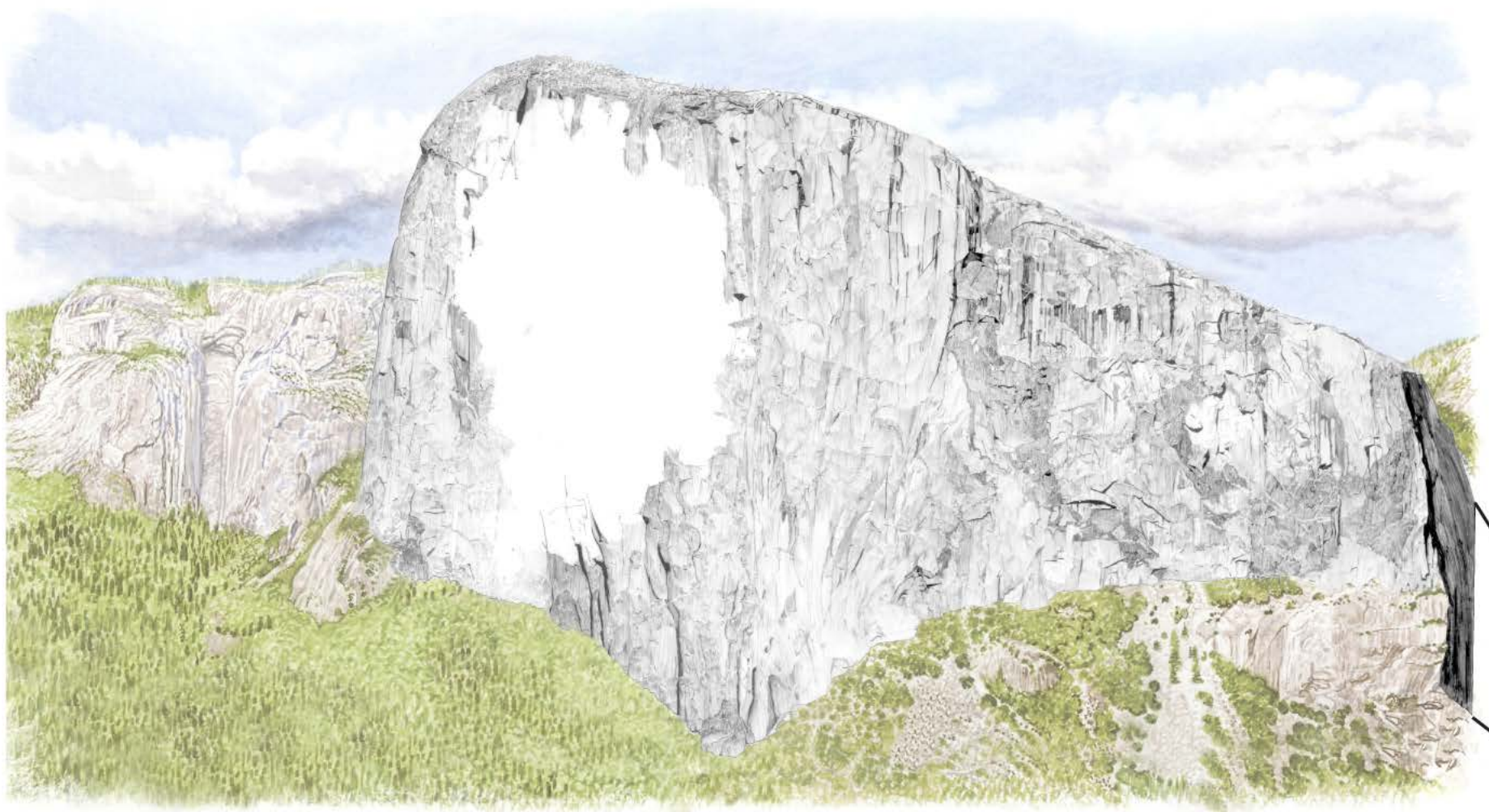






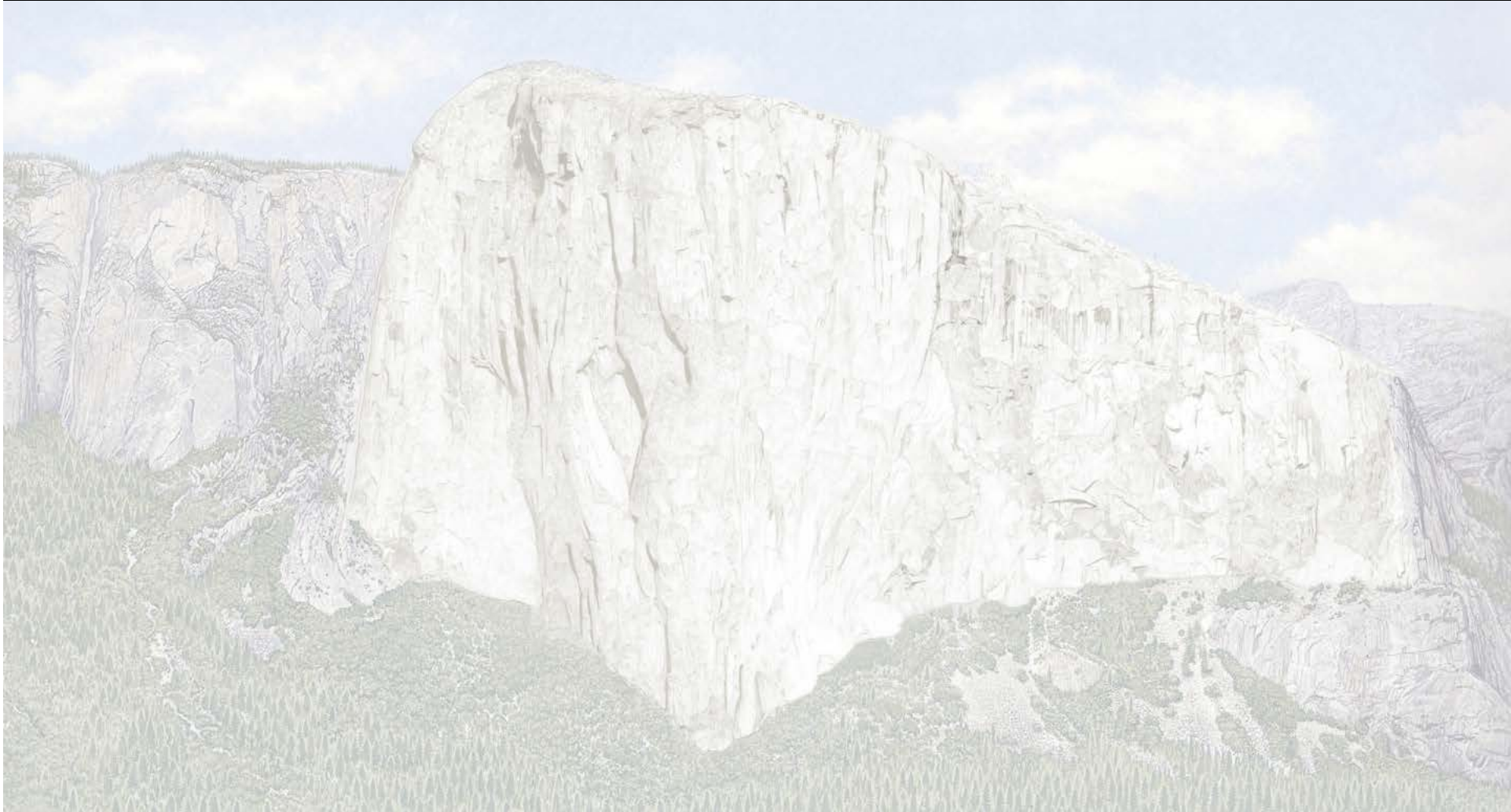




















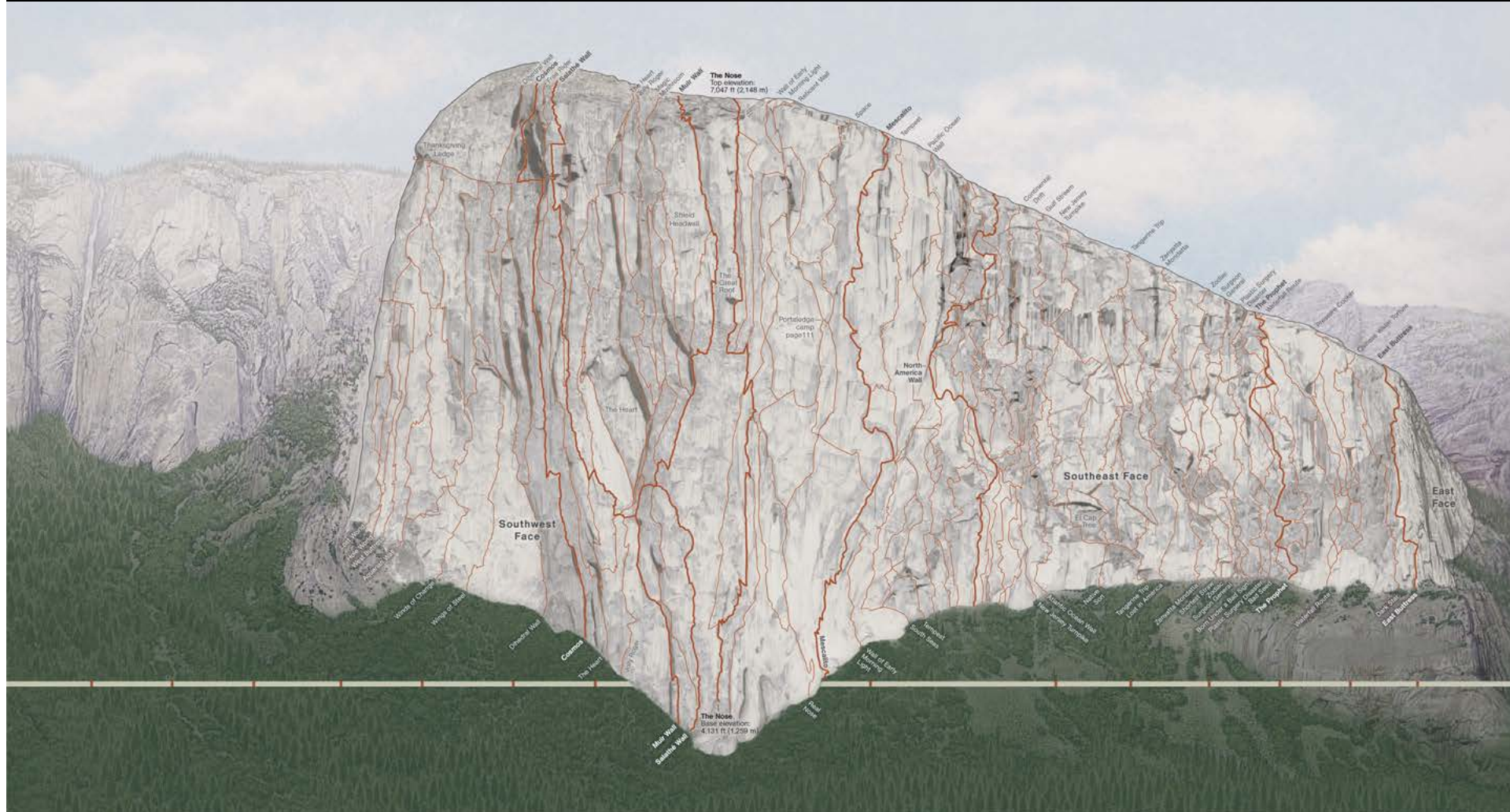














## SCALING THE WALL

## EL CAP MILESTONES

1962 Climbers go 400 feet to identify ponderosa pine for Park Service. The year some from the group climb the 1,200-foot East Butte.

1958 First major ascent: Warren Harding and team climb the Nose in 47 days over a 17-month period.

**1961** Second major ascent: The Salathe Wall is climbed in two stages over nine days by Royal Robbins, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt.

**1964** First route on the Southwest Face. The North America Wall is scaled by Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt.

**1968** First single-climber ascent: Royal Robbins spends nine days on the Mar Wall, a route created three years earlier.

**1972** Five routes are created in one season, including Cosmos, the first established by a single climber.

1975: The Nose is climbed in less than 24 hours by Jim Bridwell, John Long, and Billy Westbay.

Mar Wall  
The Wall

Elevation:  
 12,500 ft (1,250 m)

1988 First  
of a major  
Todd Skinn  
Paul Piana  
the Salathé

1980  
of two  
in one  
Schul  
Croft  
and S

1993 L	become
free clim	
A year l	
free clim	
route in	

**1993** Three routes are in one day. Florine and Schneider

**2005** The Nose free climbed in 10 hours by Tom Caldwell and Ben Rodden.

**2010** The newest route, the Prophet, is free climbed by Leo Houlding and Jason Pickles, who spent nine years creating it.

10 to: Dean Potter  
and Sean Leary  
climb the Nose  
in two hours,  
36 minutes, 45  
seconds.



**Plenary 2004**

Clean-climbing era (minimal permanent hardware to avoid damaging the rock)

Free-climbing and speed-climbing are

**Climbing routes**  
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— Featured in article  
— Other

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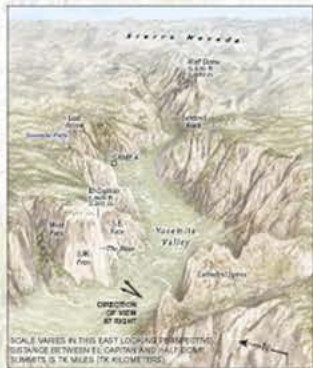






## EL CAP'S STEEPEST FACES

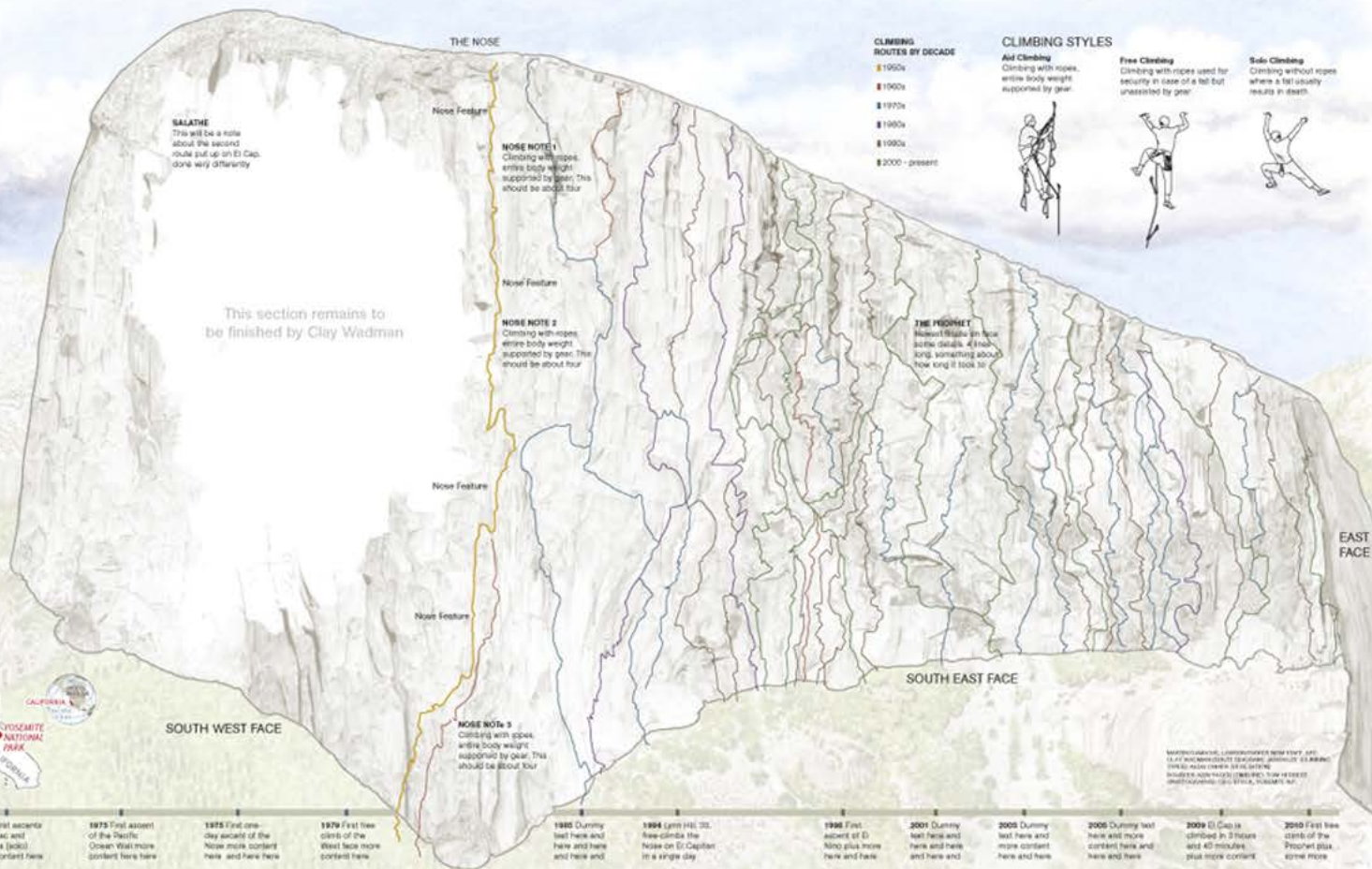
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### A HISTORY OF CLIMBING ON EL CAPITAN

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1958 First ascent of the Nose in 47 days plus more	1961 First ascent of the Salathe Wall more content here and here	1968 First solo ascent of El Capitan on Muir Wall plus more	1972 First ascents of Zodiac and Cosmos (solo) more content here	1975 First ascent of the Pacific Ocean Wall more content here here	1975 First one-day ascent of the Nose more content here and here here	1979 First free climb of the West face more content here	1980 Dummy test here and here and here and	1984 Jim Hall III free-climbs the Nose on El Capitan in a single day	1988 First ascent of El Niño plus more here and here	2001 Dummy test here and here and here and	2005 Dummy test here and more content here and here	2005 Dummy test here and more content here and here and here	2009 El Cap is climbed in 3 hours and 40 minutes plus more content	2010 First free climb of the Frecknet plus some more
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# Scaling El Capitan

No granite wall makes Yosemite Valley an international proving ground for rock climbers like 3,300-foot El Capitan. "El Cap is where dreams and egos collide," says climber Tommy Caldwell. Climbers spend months—even years—plotting new ways to follow cracks in the glacier-carved wall to the summit. On a peak-season day, 60 climbers may dot El Cap, with many on the most famous route, the Nose.



Scale varies in this east-looking perspective. The distance between El Capitan and Half Dome summits is 10 miles (16 kilometers).

## EL CAP MILESTONES

The tallest wall in the valley was the last to be ticked, because it seemed impossible to climb. Twenty-three people have died trying, though none since 2004. As gear and climbing styles have evolved (drawings, far upper right), speed has become the new frontier.

### Pioneers era

1956 First ascent, the Nose route, led by Warren Harding; 47 days over an 18-month period.

1960 Roger Robbins and team climb the Nose in 65 straight days.

1963 First route created by only two climbers: Yvon Chouinard and T.M. Harbert climb the Main Wall in seven days.

1968 First solo ascent, made by Roger Robbins on the Main Wall in nine days.

1970 Warren Harding and Dean Colwell spend 27 straight days on the face to create the route Wall of Early Morning Light.

Clean-climbing area (minimal permanent hardware to avoid damaging the rock)

1972 Five new routes established in one season, a record number.

1975 The Nose is climbed in less than 24 hours by Jim Brindley, John Long, and Billy Westberg.

Free-climbing and speed-climbing era

1980 First major route free-climbed: Todd Skinner and Paul Pons on the Salathe Wall.

1990 First link-up of two routes in one day: Dave Schultz and Peter Craft climb the Nose and Salathe Wall.

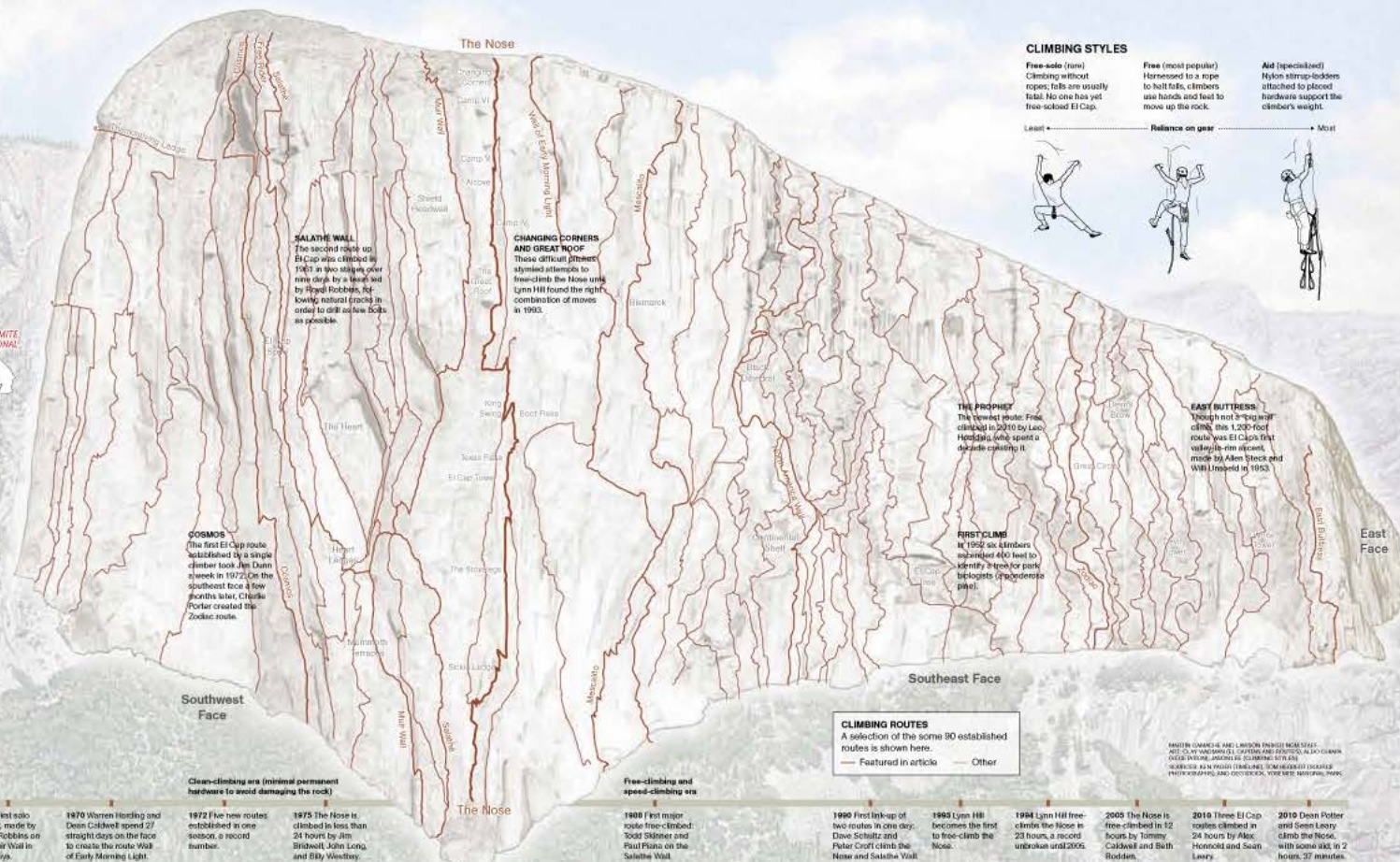
1993 Lynn Hill becomes the first to free-climb the Nose.

1994 Lynn Hill free-climbs the Nose in 23 hours, a record unbroken until 2005.

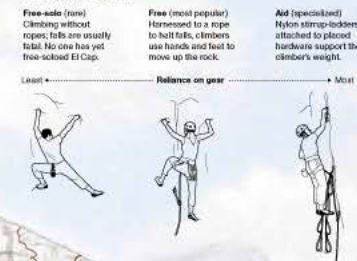
2005 The Nose is free-climbed in 52 hours by Tommy Caldwell and Beth Rodden.

2010 Three El Cap routes climbed in 24 hours by Alex Honnold and Sean Leary.

2019 Dean Potter and Sean Leary climb the Nose, with some aid, in 2 hours, 37 minutes.



## CLIMBING STYLES



**CLIMBING ROUTES**  
A selection of the some 90 established routes is shown here.  
— Featured in article — Other

MAP BY GUY LAWRENCE AND LINDSEY FENNER FOR NATURE. ART BY JAY KRAMER. OVERVIEW AND ROUTE MAPS BY JAY KRAMER. COURTESY OF YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK.





## El Capitan

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El Capitan's 2,916 vertical feet of granite have made Yosemite an international proving ground for climbers for decades. Climbers spend months—even years—creating new routes up cracks in the wall to the summit. On a peak-season day 60 climbers may dot El Cap, many on the most famous route, the Nose.

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1908 First major ascent: Warren Harding and team climb the Nose in 47 days over a 17-month period.

1911 Second major ascent: The Salathé Wall is climbed in six stages over nine days by Royal Robbins, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt.

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1993 Three El Cap routes are climbed in one day by Hans Rornie and Steve Schneider.

2006 The nose is free climbed in 12 hours by Tommy Caldwell and Beth Rodden.

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2014 Dean Potter and Sean Leary climb the Nose in ten hours, 45 minutes, 45 seconds.

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Most

Reliance on gear

Least

### The Nose

Top elevation:  
7,047 ft (2,148 m)



[See All Routes](#)

### 1958

First major ascent: Warren Harding  
and team climb the Nose in 47 days  
over a 17-month period.





## **EL CAPITAN**

**Clay Wadman (El Cap Art)**

**Aldo Chiappe (Art)**

**Ken Yager (Research)**

**Lawson Parker (Production, Design)**

**David Whitmore (Design)**

**Jane Vessels (Editorial)**

**Xrez Studio (Imagery)**

**Jason Lee (Climber Art)**