

# Gripped

The Climbing Magazine

## Ben Harnden Squamish Climber

Red River Gorge

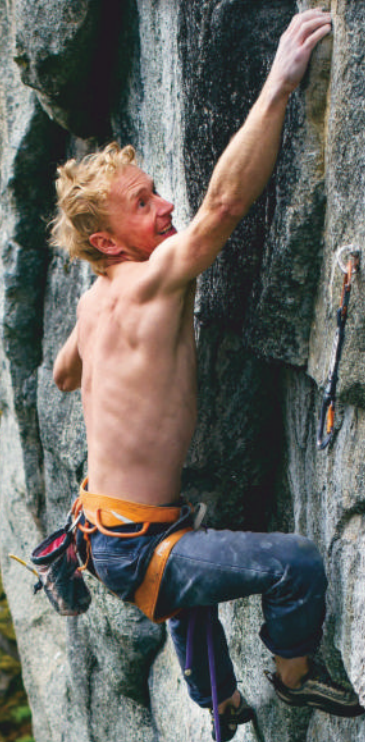
Mexico 5.14 Big Wall

African Adventure

Beginner Sport Climbing Tips

Grant Statham Rescue Guru

Cuba Rocks





April/May 2025

Mary Eden in Black Mamba 5.14, Utah  
Photo Izzy

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Cover: Ben Harnden on Spirit of the West 5.14a, Paradise Wall, Squamish Photo Thomas Burden

# Red River Gorge Gets a New Edge

## RRGCC's Landmark Acquisition

Merging recreation and environmental stewardship, the coalition secures a critical 718-acre piece of property

Chimney Rock, Red River Gorge

Story by Ryleigh Norgrove

The Red River Gorge Climbing Coalition just finalized a landmark \$1.7 million deal—securing a 718-acre property in the heart of the Red River Gorge, a cornerstone of the Southeast's climbing scene.

The land—purchased from Ashland's former Wildlife Management Area in Lee County—is now much more than a pin on a map, it's the largest land acquisition ever made by a local climbing organization in the United States.

As RRGCC Executive Director Billy Simek put it: "If we own it, they can't close it."

### Simple. True. And hard-earned.

The land's story isn't new; it's been worked over before. Once an oil and gas extraction site, it took years of rehabilitation—clearing pump jacks, dismantling old tanks, and letting the forest breathe again—before it found new life as a wildlife management area leased to the state of Kentucky.

The clock started ticking when the land hit Zillow in early 2023. The risk was clear: if the RRGCC didn't move fast, private buyers could snap it up, cutting off access for good. By summer, the coalition had locked down a purchase agreement and launched a full-scale fundraising push to meet the \$1.7 million goal. Months of hustle followed—rallying donors, securing grants, and piecing together loans—before finally closing the deal last week.

Now, it's entered its next chapter with the RRGCC.

This acquisition does more than add acreage—it reinforces an existing network of protected climbing spaces. The deal connects seamlessly with Cave Fork Recreational Preserve (now 582 acres), Miller Fork (now 418 acres), and Pendergrass-Murray (now 727 acres), transforming these once-isolated spaces into a continuous stretch of protected, climbable wilderness.

"This was the largest thing we've ever taken on," Simek said. "And we couldn't have done it without the incredible support from our community and partners. It's proof of what's possible when climbers come together for a shared mission."

Six crags already dot the landscape, each carved into the sandstone that defines this stretch of the Red. But the bigger story might be what's untouched—14 miles of cliff line waiting to be bolted, climbed,

and claimed. Names like Monster Wall, Devil's Kitchen, Outer Space, and Corn Flake already carry weight with climbers who know the Hell Creek drainage. But this acquisition doesn't just protect those classics—it throws the door wide open for what's next.

### A funding mosaic: How the deal came together

The scale of the land was impressive—and so was securing the funding. No big windfall here—just a grind of piecing together supports from federal, state, and private backers.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Kentucky Field Office and the Kentucky Natural Lands Trust contributed \$350,000 from the Imperiled Bat Conservation Fund, aimed at safeguarding critical bat habitats in the Hell Creek corridor. The U.S. Forest Service's Community Forest Program contributed \$600,000 to support the creation of a 570-acre community forest as part of the acquisition. Then came the James Graham Brown Foundation's \$500,000 grant, recognizing both the economic and recreational significance of the Red River Gorge—reducing the RRGCC's remaining debt to under \$100,000, a manageable number compared to the acquisition's original price tag.

Dunn highlighted just how rare this kind of collaboration is, saying, "This deal brought together a mix of financial support—from federal conservation funds to grassroots community donations. It's rare to see a project weave together such a diverse array of backers so quickly."

But the coalition wasn't just relying on big checks. Years of grassroots hustle—memberships, fundraising events, and a community that never stopped showing up—built the reserves for a \$110,000 down payment. The remaining acquisition funds came through private loans, supported by an anonymous donor and Jordan Wood—underscoring just how much of this deal relied on personal commitment and community trust.

Dunn didn't shy away from the complexity of the process, saying, "This wasn't just a land deal—it was a complicated transaction, with an unwilling seller, multiple partners, and diverse funding sources. It was messy. But the coalition's determination made the difference. They didn't back down—they solved every challenge, one step at a time."

### From land deal to stewardship: What comes next

With the financial hurdles cleared, attention turns to the next major challenge—how to responsibly transform this protected landscape into a sustainable climbing space.

With the foundation set, the RRGCC has already begun making plans to bring in the route development community—“those who know how to read a wall and unlock its potential,” as Simek put it.

But before the first bolts go in, infrastructure must come first. Trails, parking areas, and access points need to be built to ensure climbers can reach the cliffs without damaging the habitat around them. Additionally, a new parking area has been secured on the ridge above Miller Fork, providing easier access for two-wheel-drive vehicles and improving trailhead accessibility.

The coalition is working closely with land managers to the guide future development responsibly, ensuring every new trail and anchor respects the delicate ecosystems that define the area—and the conservation funding that helped secure it. As part of the grant funding, the RRGCC is also required to develop a comprehensive forest management plan. This will include efforts to restore stream habitats by removing vehicle crossings, improving riparian corridors, and protecting sensitive ecosystems from further degradation.

And it's not just climbers who rely on these cliffs. The forest is home to species like the Kentucky arrow darter and the Virginia big-eared bat—creatures that thrive in areas that draw climbers in.

As Access Fund Southeast regional manager Daniel Dunn explained, “Eastern Kentucky is a biodiversity hotspot. Even with its history of oil and gas extraction, the region is full of beautiful hardwood forests and untouched conservation lands. Protecting spaces like this isn't just about preserving scenery—it's about safeguarding habitats for species that exist nowhere else.”

For the RRGCC, sustainability isn't optional—it's central to the mission. That means managing foot traffic, minimizing erosion, and protecting the fragile forest floor surrounding climbing zones.

“We're not just here to build climbing access—we're here to protect these places for the long haul,” Simek said. “If we don't take responsibility for the land, who will?”

### A national blueprint for climber-led conservation

This acquisition goes beyond local impact—it sets a precedent for climbing communities nationwide.

“This isn't just a local win—it's a national blueprint for how climbers can take land conservation into their own hands,” Dunn said. “It proves that with the right partnerships and community support, climbers can lead the way in protecting the landscapes they love.”

It's part of a bigger shift—climbing groups aren't just fighting for access anymore. They're stepping up as the long-term stewards of the land. Groups like the Southeastern Climbers Coalition and the Carolina Climbers Coalition have already laid the groundwork, proving that climbers can take responsibility for managing the spaces they play in.

The Ashland project isn't just about adding another crag to the map—it's about protecting a piece of the Red from being lost to development. It's about keeping the trails open, the wilderness wild, and ensuring the climbing community remains woven into the land's future.

For the RRGCC, the acquisition is a reminder that climbers aren't just visitors—they're stewards. And with every dollar raised, every trail carved, and every bolt placed, that responsibility deepens.

“Acquisition is just the beginning,” Dunn said. “The real challenge comes afterward: managing the land, protecting the ecosystem, and building the infrastructure climbers need. That takes ongoing support. If you care about places like the Red, supporting organizations like RRGCC isn't optional—it's essential.”

### The work ahead: Protecting the Red's future

While the acquisition marks a major achievement, the RRGCC still faces financial hurdles. Nearly \$100,000 is needed to clear the remaining debt and begin laying the groundwork for infrastructure improvements



Red River Gorge in autumn

and long-term habitat protections.

Initial support has been strong. Within the first 24 hours of launching its fundraising campaign, the coalition received nearly \$20,000 in independent donations. To meet the remaining goal, the RRGCC is continuing to rely on independent donations—an effort that has been at the forefront of the coalition's success so far.

Supporters can contribute directly through the RRGCC's donation portal or get involved by participating in upcoming stewardship days, which include trail-building projects, infrastructure development, and habitat restoration.

Clearing the debt is just the start. Keeping the land open—and protecting its wild spaces—will take ongoing commitment from climbers and conservation partners alike.

“We're standing on the edge of something big,” Simek said. “This isn't just about preserving what we have—it's about creating new opportunities for climbers and protecting this land for generations to come.”

*Ryleigh Norgrove is a climber and writer based in the U.S.*

Classics at Motherlode Crag at Red River Gorge

