



The Shield

A Three-Pitch Ontario Crag One Minute From the Car

Photos by **Tim Banfield**

North of Lake Superior are several long canyons formed by retreating glaciers ages ago that are lined with vertical cliffs. There have been stages of route development over the past 40 years that has resulted in hundreds of routes, ranging in grade from 5.5 to 5.13, which include trad, bolted and mixed. And despite many of the plum lines having been climbed, there are a lifetime's worth of new routes to establish in northern Ontario, from roadside single-pitch sport routes to long adventure trad lines.

One of the best new crags to be opened in the past decade north of Superior is on a section of exceptionally solid stone only one minute from the road. The vertical cliff is called The Shield and it's found in the northern part of Orient Bay near Reflection Lake. There are only eight routes, but when combined in a day, it makes for over 200 metres of five-star bolted climbing. The rock is highly featured with sharp edges, rounded slopers, splitter cracks, chimney-like grooves and shake-out-the-pump jugs. There's big exposure on the wall thanks to the lack of ledges and sheerness of the rock walls to the left and right.

In 2008, Phil Dunn and Kyle Brooks climbed Hidden Treasures, a 70-metre 5.10c up a discontinuous crack system to the left of the main crag that is The Shield. It's a high-quality route that requires good gear-placing skills. Local climber and guide Aric Fishman started to explore the potential bolting routes up the more compact section of wall next to Hidden Treasures in 2017 by accessing the top and dropping a 70-metre rope.

The first pitch Fishman climbed was with Paul Desaulniers. It followed an obvious start to a few 5.9 moves to an anchor. Fishman returned with Thunder Bay climber Andy Noga to add two more pitches. "We watched a rabbit fall, or jump, from the top and it flew over us," said Fishman, when explaining the climb's name, which is Suicide Rabbit. It's become one of the



Opposite left: **Mich Balto** on Chimney Sweep

Opposite right: **Brandon Pullan** on Pyramids

Right: **Aric Fishman** on Chimney Sweep

Below: **Fishman** on Pyramids

Bottom right: **Erik Paton**





most popular bolted multi-pitch routes in the area.

Fishman then turned his attention to one of the coolest looking routes on the wall. After some easy steps that lead to a ledge, a series of tricky 5.9 moves lead to a shallow chimney. Using stems, layback and some fun body positions, climb the easier-than-it-looks feature to the anchor. Named Chimney Sweep, it looks like it will be more difficult than 5.9, but this 28-metre, 12-bolt modern classic is more than within the range of most weekend warriors.

Between Chimney Sweep and Suicide Rabbit are two technical routes with engaging sections. The first on the left is Just About to Rock, a 62-metre, two-pitch 5.11a with some exciting climbing. It was opened over several years and follows a 14-bolt first 5.10a pitch to a semi-hanging anchor. The next 18-bolt 5.11a pitch is one of the best on the wall. It heads up a flaring crack to big moves and a tricky crux. Take a minute to feel the exposure.

The next route to the right is Pyramids, a 28-metre, 12-bolt 5.10d with some hard-to-read slab moves on thin feet with nice crimps. The crux is a side-pull-sloper to a far-off crimp. It's well bolted with good stances to clip from, but like all routes on this wall, you'll get some air time if you whip while clipping.

A few other single-pitch climbs are found on The Shield, including the 30-metre Trash Panda 5.10a and the 30-metre Danger Noodle 5.9. While there are still dozens of great-looking lines all around to be established, this section of vertical solid stone is one of the best crags in the Midwest.—*Gripped*





Below: **Brandon Pullan** takes a whipper on Pyramids

Bottom: **Fishman** and **Paton** look on

Opposite top: **Fishman** on Pyramids

Opposite left: **Balto** on Suicide Rabbit

Opposite bottom right: **Balto** on Chimney Sweep

Area Details

Getting to The Shield: From Nipigon, drive east until Highway 11 and turn north. Drive to the Reflection Lake cabins and continue for a few hundred metres and park on the shoulder. Follow the flagging tape at GPS: 49.338686, -88.126428.

Camping: Book ahead of your visit and stay at the Reflection Lake cabins. There are also hotels and campgrounds in Nipigon and Thunder Bay.

Phone Reception: It's spotty at best in this area, so don't expect it to be working.

Other Climbs: Orient Bay has dozens of routes from 10 to 100 metres on several different crags and walls. The local guidebook has everything you need.

Guidebook: For more climbing routes in northwestern Ontario, check out Fishman's detailed guidebook called *Thunder Bay Climbing: A Guide To Northwest Ontario's Best Kept Secret 2nd Edition*. It covers 18 areas and has nearly 1,000 rock climbs.

Access: Join the Ontario Alliance of Climbers to support the great work they do to ensure access across the province. Visit *ontarioallianceofclimbers.ca* for more info.

Palisades of the Pijitawabik

A plaque near one of the parking lots along Highway 11 beneath the walls of Orient Bay, reads: "Here at Pijitawabik Bay and other Lake Nipigon localities, ancient rocks of the Precambrian Shield were overlain by a diabase sheet formed approximately 1,200 million years ago. Erosion by water and ice removed the covering rocks and sculptured the sheet into rounded, flat-topped hills bounded by escarpments, which rise in some places 152 metres above Lake Nipigon. The hills are separated by deep, narrow valleys. The towering pillars of the cliffs are the result of columnar jointing, a cooling phenomenon developed during the solidification of the magma. Frost action along the cracks in and around the columns causes splintering of the rock and occasionally the collapse of entire pillars, leaving the imposing palisades seen here."





