

**Explore**

Life and land from the heart of the Yellowstone Region

# Big Sky

FREE

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# Getting high in the mountains

## Sierra climbing pioneer, author to speak in Bozeman

BY EMILY WOLFE  
EXPLORE BIG SKY MANAGING EDITOR

Halfway through the 32K Boulder Mountain Tour Nordic ski race, Doug Robinson felt his body and his emotions entering a state he calls “flow.”

“It’s where the skiing gets really easy and even though you’ve already skied for hours and you’re tired, the way it feels is fresh and almost easy,” he said. “[I felt] very, very alive.”

This continued off and on for the rest of the race. “I would have two or three minutes at a time where everything was skiing perfectly, and then I’d slump into feeling tired and hungry again and wanting it to be over, and then it would go back to being effortless and bright and wonderful.”

That feeling isn’t a new one for Robinson, 68, and a rock climbing pioneer in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains. In fact, it’s one he’s chased his entire life, from running the back roads near his parents’ home in the Silicon Valley as a teenager – a time when no one ran for fun, he notes – to establishing new routes in the high Sierra and skiing around the western U.S. for the last 60 years.

“More than just a glassy-eyed hippie, Doug was a writer/philosopher/athlete at the center of a powerful outdoor sports movement unique to California,” according to a 2009 story in Adventure Sports Journal online.

“True, a trend towards environmentalism and a ‘back-to-the-land’ consciousness was flowering all over the country back then, but what Doug and his friends like Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard, Chuck Pratt, Galen Rowell and Dennis Hennek were exploring was different... Each had spent many days lashed to vertical Sierra rock, thousands of feet off the ground. Each [was] adept at rugged existence in a harsh alpine environment.”

Robinson chronicled many of these adventures in “A Night on the Ground, a Day in the Open,” a book published in 1997, and has also written for



Robinson climbing in the Palisades region, above Bishop, Calif., with 14,242-foot North Palisade in the background. He guided in the Palisades for a decade starting in 1966. PHOTO BY GORDON WILTSIE | COURTESY OF DOUG ROBINSON

National Geographic, Sports Illustrated, Outside and Men’s Journal, among others.

Most recently, he authored “The Alchemy of Action,” a book about that siren song of “flow,” which he explains is a hormonal high created by activities like skiing, climbing and running. Having performed ample self-study, taken enough college chemistry for a minor, and lugged medical textbooks into the mountains to study between guiding gigs, it’s fair to say he is fascinated by it.

He will present a slideshow in Bozeman on the topic on Wednesday, March 26, at Northern Lights Trading Co., in coordination with the American

Alpine Club – Montana Section.

“What he is doing is similar to Michael Pollan’s conceit in the “Botany of Desire,” but takes it a step further,” writer Bruce Willey told EBS in an email about Robinson’s book and presentation. “Doug is urging you to get high on your own brain by simply getting off the couch, putting down the iPhone, and getting outdoors to experience your brain when it’s turned on fully.”

Willey described Robinson’s presenting style as engaging. “Like John Muir who he is often compared to, his feet barely touch the ground.”

### Q&A with Doug Robinson

**Explore Big Sky: Have you been to Bozeman before?**  
**Doug Robinson:** I’ve been to Bozeman a number of times... I’ve skied up at Big Sky and at Bridger Bowl, and have hung out a few times in Paradise Valley because writer and editor friends of mine live there – Russell Chatham, Tom McGuane, Jim Harrison and Terry McDonnell, who was the editor of Outside magazine its first year when I worked there.

**EBS: What did you do at Outside?**  
**DR:** I wrote articles, cover stories for a number of years, features, gear reviews. Basically I was hanging around the San Francisco office so

much that they ended up giving me an office and a typewriter.

**EBS: Tell me about the difference between writing on a typewriter and a computer? Has your process changed?**

**DR:** Neither the typewriter nor the computer is as germane to my process as a plain old hardback notebook, a small one, and a pen and a pencil that goes into my belt bag that’s with me when I’m [outdoors]. My writing process depends more on inspiration from moving my body than it does

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The Circle Boulder in the Buttermilk boulders outside Bishop got its name from photographer Gordon Wiltsie's idea of cutting this classic shot into a circle, which Robinson calls "pleasantly disorienting." PHOTO BY GORDON WILTSIE | COURTESY OF DOUG ROBINSON

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from thought processes. It's really important to me to have that notebook, and to sit down by the trail or on a ledge on a climb and write down a piece of inspiration that occurs to me.

**EBS: What can people expect from your slideshow?**

**DR:** The show follows the arc of the book, ["The Alchemy of Action"], to some degree, [and is illustrated] with slides about what an adrenaline reaction actually is, and why that's something that nobody would cheerfully repeat, and then segues into what the brain hormones really are.

There's noradrenaline, [the fight-or-flight hormone], and dopamine, our pleasure hormone, and serotonin, the roll-with-it hormone, the one where you feel like you're on top of things ... The last two ingredients of the hormonal cocktail are the psychedelic compounds. Anandamide is the hormonal equivalent of marijuana. The last one is DMT, one of the most powerful psychedelics known, the active ingredient in ayahuasca, [a drug people take with] South American shamans.

**EBS: Let's talk about drug use.**

**DR:** This kind of science can't be done without reference to the drugs. You can do experiments on lab rats, and you can see what drugs are evoked in their brains, but you can't ask them about their experience. You can ask people about their experience, but you can't slice and dice their brains to be sure the [hormones] are there. The only way science has been able to overcome that is through personal experience – the neurochemists take the drugs they make and see what their experience is. This has been going on for hundreds of years.

**EBS: So your theory is that we get high from climbing and skiing, right?**

**DR:** Yes, but people who get high from climbing and skiing don't get so far out that they lose contact with everyday reality. It's a low-dose effect, a threshold dose that brightens our perceptions but... we're not doing slow rolls through deep space the way people sometimes do on psychedelics.

**EBS: You've spent a great deal of your life outside. But you're also a writer. How do you find balance?**

**DR:** That's one of those ongoing problems, right? Just now I was sitting inside the library building where I can get wi-fi, doing that work. Now [talking to you], I'm in the sunshine looking at the mountains, appreciating that I was out of touch with that for the last couple hours.

**EBS: Tell me more about the space you find in the mountains.**

**DR:** I'm a lucky person, genetically speaking, because the threshold of that visionary affect for me was relatively low, so that I slip into that state easily. That's had an addictive quality in my life. I go 'OK well, I just went climbing, and I got high from it, let's go do it again.' Thank goodness it's such a healthy addiction.

**EBS: How much of this is about attitude – about seeing the glass as half full?**

**DR:** Part of my purpose in writing this book is to call attention to something that initially is pretty subtle. This is not like taking a tab of acid and going into hyperdrive. It's dialed back. I'm

hoping people can start to notice this happening in themselves at a more subtle level ... If you understand it's there and it's being evoked by your activity, then you can tune into the positive part of it more readily.

It's like an emotional or hormonal training. You train your heart and your lungs for this stuff, right? You train yourself to make moves on rock and on ice and on snow. It's perceptual and emotional training that runs parallel to those.

**EBS: You're still able to backcountry ski and do long climbs at age 68. What's your secret?**

**DR:** Being really careful. Climbing conservatively.

**WHAT:** "The Alchemy of Action," a slideshow with Doug Robinson

**WHEN:** Wednesday, March 26, 7:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** Northern Lights Trading Co.

*Robinson's new book, [The Alchemy of Action](#), will be available at the show and also at his website [movingoverstone.com](#).*



A recent photo of Robinson in The Needles of California. DOUG ROBINSON COLLECTION