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Thanks again for your support.

Alan James, January 2004

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You’ll need it.

Eastern Sierra Ice MiniGUIDE

by

Robert “SP” Parker

Version 1.0 - January 2004

ROCKFAX MiniGUIDE design by Alan James and Mick Ryan.
Published by ROCKFAX Ltd.
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Introduction

Ice climbing in the Golden State is either frustrating or ecstatic. Waiting for a certain waterfall to freeze or a Sierra gully to assume its desired glassy consistency has become an occupation for many climbers. But when the waiting is over and the moment finally arrives, it’s worth it because the beauty of climbing in Muir’s “range of light” can’t be surpassed. --Jeff Lowe--

Ice in California? Yes, Virginia, as well as all of that sun and fine weather there is some respectable ice climbing. No, not the waterfall ice you would find along the Parks Highway, nor the long ice routes of Northwest volcanoes, but certainly enough to have some great days out and develop skills and train for harder ascents worldwide. There is opportunity to climb ice and snow almost year-round in and around the Sierra Nevada.

Waterfall ice is a limited commodity in the Golden State. There are frozen falls in the Tahoe area, Yosemite freezing up is an event always anticipated, but rarely seen and even more rare is ice at Southern California’s Idyllwild area. But the most predictable places are Lee Vining Canyon and June Lake on the Eastern Sierra. However there are certain things to consider, not the least of which is that a sudden warm spell can turn the ice into mush, although the high elevation of the Eastern Sierra sites generally provide good waterfall climbing from mid-December through to mid March. But the paucity of ice in a populous state also leads to overcrowding at some of the areas.

If you want to avoid the crowds then the late summer and fall ice season in the Sierra Nevada is for you. Included in this guide are detailed descriptions to nine snow and ice couloirs that are the most classic and give the most consistent conditions. The wilderness permit season restricts access and the length of some of the approaches are long. But if you are prepared to shoulder a load and hike then you will be rewarded with great alpine ice under the traditional blue skies of California.

Warnings, Caveats and Disclaimers
This guide is just that; a guide. Changing conditions may mean ice may be harder than the ratings given. A sudden storm can change what was a straightforward ascent into a fight for survival. Know your abilities and climb within them. Do not rely upon others for help. Be self-sufficient and climb with care. The climbs will always be there. Make sure that you are!
### Areas and Routes Covered

Eastern Sierra waterfall ice is no more dangerous (and no more safe) than anywhere else. It is however popular. The proximity to the huge population base of southern California and the popularity of ice climbing means plenty of climbers. These areas will be especially busy on holidays and weekends. If you can, try and climb mid-week.

#### Avalanche Danger

Avalanches can occur at any time, especially in the winter. All the waterfall ice climbing areas can be threatened by avalanches from far above. Know what you are doing and do not think of going if the avalanche danger is high to extreme. For current avalanche conditions during the Sierra winter check out [www.csac.org/Bulletins/Calif/current.html](http://www.csac.org/Bulletins/Calif/current.html). To read up on avalanche danger we recommend “Avalanche Aware - Safe Travel in Avalanche Terrain” by John Moynier and published by Falcon Guides (ISBN 1-56044-670-6).

### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WATERFALL ICE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lundy Canyon WI2 - 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>NOVEMBER until the first big snows</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Vining WI2 - 5 (Mixed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>DECEMBER APRIL</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June Lake WI2 - 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>DECEMBER APRIL</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parker Canyon WI2 - 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>NOVEMBER until the first big snows</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Lake and other areas WI4 - 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>DECEMBER APRIL</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALPINE ICE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Peak North Couloir WI 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>ABOUT FIVE MILE</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Dana North Couloir WI 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>JUly - NOVEMBER</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Mendel Mendel Left (Ice Nine) WI 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>ABOUT FIVE MILE</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Gilbert NE Couloir WI 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>JUly - NOVEMBER</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Palisades V - Notch WI 3+ U - Notch WI 3 Clyde Couloir WI 3 The Underhill Couloir WI 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>ABOUT FIVE MILE</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Ice Map and Ratings

#### Ratings

How hard is an ice route? This will always be a tricky question since ice varies from season to season, day to day and morning to afternoon. One year a route may be predominantly rock, another, fat with ice covering the hard rock sections. Soft warmer ice will accept a pick easier than the same ice on a cold brittle day when a single tool placement shatters off large plates of ice and fractures one's confidence.

So, any ice grade is an approximation and has a large degree of subjectivity. The grades used here reflect the technical difficulty of a climb.

- **WI1** - Low angle ice requiring crampons rather than just ice tool work.
- **WI2** - 60-70 degree ice with a few short steeper steps.
- **WI3** - Sustained 70-80 degree ice with short steep sections.
- **WI4** - Sustained 75-90 degree ice with significant vertical sections.
- **WI5** - 85-90 degree ice, sustained.
- **WI6** - Steep and arduous with few resting places. The ice may be thin and hard to protect.
- **WI7** - Continuous vertical ice to overhanging ice with dubious, hard to find and sparse protection.

A + or a - may be added to denote harder or easier variations.

**WI** = Water Ice
Accommodation
In Lee Vining Murphey’s Motel is climber friendly and offers special accommodation deals for ice climbers (see the voucher with this guide). In June Lake the Whispering Pines is close to the ice with rooms that accommodate plenty of climbers. Camping is possible in Lee Vining Canyon but the temperatures are cold and the sun takes an awfully long time to reach the tent in the mornings.

Murphey’s Motel (760) 647-6316
Whispering Pines (760) 648-7762
Double Eagle (760) 648-7004

Food and Beer
Neither June Lake nor Lee Vining are known for their culinary delights. However at June Lake, a few hundred yards from the parking area from the ice is the upscale Double Eagle Resort and Spa. This is a great place for breakfast and, if you have a big budget, dinner and a first class massage. Alternatively try the Tiger Bar which offers basic food, beer, local atmosphere and a veritable jungle of tiger photographs. In Lee Vining Nicely’s Restaurant is the only game in town. They are closed on Wednesdays during the week in winter.

Climbing Shop
In Mammoth Lakes, Mammoth Mountaineering Supply www.mammothgear.com can outfit you with whatever you have forgotten and in Bishop, Wilson Eastside Sports www.eastsidesports.com has long been recognized as the place to go.

Guides
For mountain guide services Sierra Mountain Center can guide you up any of the routes described in this guide, www.sierramountaincenter.com or call (760) 873-8526

Conditions
Current ice information and current photos can be found at:
Sierra Mountain Center’s Ice Report www.sierramountaincenter.com
Doug Nidever’s Ice Report www.themountainguide.com/icereport

More On Ice Ratings - M’s
See the rating table on page three for an explanation of the Water Ice grades. Mixed climbs are also hard to define. Routes are climbed with ice tools and crampons and the amount of ice is variable.

M1 - M3 Easy, low angle using handhold rather than tools.
M4 Slabby to near vertical with some technical dry tooling.
M5 Some sustained vertical dry tooling.
M6 Vertical to overhanging with difficult dry tooling.
M7 Overhanging with powerful and technical dry tooling.
M8 Some horizontal climbing requiring very powerful and technical dry tooling.
M9 Continuously vertical or overhanging with technical holds; or a juggy 2-3 body length roof.
M10 At least 10m of horizontal rock or 30m of overhanging dry tooling with powerful moves, no rests.
M11 A rope length of overhanging gymnastic climbing; or up to 15m of roof.
M12 M11 with bouldery, dynamic moves and tenuous technical holds.

Whether you are visiting for a week or make frequent visits to the Eastern Sierra this guidebook delivers the information that you need and will save you money. All the cliffs listed on the right are included in the usual meticulous and clear ROCKFAX style. If you like to know all your options, and get to the crag and the routes easily this guidebook won’t let you down. PLUS it also includes information on where to stay and eat, and how to get to the Eastern Sierras hot springs at the end of the day.

Eastern Sierra Climbing
by Mick Ryan
Robert “SP” Parker
Todd Vogel
Bob Harrington

The Next ROCKFAX print guidebook
There isn’t one all encompassing guidebook to the variety and diverse climbing found on the Eastern Sierra, in fact there are twelve separate guidebooks covering different areas and aspects. If you like to “mix it up” when visiting the Eastern Sierra and spend some time sport climbing, bouldering, doing some great trad routes or even heading in to the mountains to do an alpine route or an ice climb, getting the information you need is expensive (upwards of $80). But no longer as our next print guide presents the most comprehensive climbing information to the Eastern Sierra in one volume.
LUNDY CANYON ICE

Lundy Canyon is a lesser known area that under the right conditions can offer good ice climbing.

Cold fall temps + little snow + a will for adventure climbing + a bike = Lundy Ice Climbing

When James Wilson was asked if he had climbed at Lundy Canyon he answered, “Yes twice”, when asked if he enjoyed it he replied, “That’s why we went twice. It has some of the prettiest ice I’ve ever climbed on”.

It is quite a hike to the ice, around 4.5 miles, but you are pretty much guaranteed not to see anyone else and you will feel in the heart of the mountains. The ice is not extensive and not steep but offers a fun day’s outing. The first recorded ascent was by Jim Collins, John Ellsworth and Art Buck in the mid 1970’s and they christened their ascent “Three Wise Men” rating it WI 4 and it was 300 ft in length.

Approach
Take the Lundy Canyon Road north of Lee Vining and drive it to the gate closure at the east end of Lundy Lake. A bike will make the 1.5 mile hike around the lake on a paved road much more pleasant and then if conditions allow you can bike through the Lundy Lake Resort and up the dirt road for 1.25 miles to where the hiking trail begins. Pick up the trail that heads to Saddlebag Lake and Lundy Pass. Follow this for 1.75 miles to where it switchbacks up steeply past a cliff band and the waterfalls. Leave the trail at a switchback and duck around the corner to the gully that has the ice. This is barely a few hundred yards off the trail.

The Climbing
The falls here do not see sun from November through to February and form up readily. The lower sections are lower angle and will get snow covered in a big storm. The top rope length is the steepest with 80 degree bulges and Grade III climbing. The ice can be hollow in places with thin ice over running water.

The Descent
About as easy as it gets. From the top of the falls head south a hundred yards to a small saddle and you will pick up the trail which will take you back to the base.
Highway 120 links the east side of the Sierra to Yosemite Valley so it was only natural that during the Golden Age of Yosemite some of the masters of the time would happen upon the frozen falls and icicles of Lee Vining Canyon.

Yvon Chouinard and Doug Robinson were amongst the first to venture here and in 1970 accomplished the first ascent of the central falls using the new tools that Chouinard was developing. A series of wonderful photos from this time grace Chouinard’s “Climbing Ice” book if you can find a copy.

Lee Vining Ice is home to the longest and steepest climbs in California. This area is located above Lee Vining Creek and below Highway 120 (which is closed in the winter months). Local lore has it that the falls form from water flowing holes punched in the aqueduct that takes water from Ellery Lake to the power plant. However SCE (Southern California Edison) debunk this story saying that they check the pipe on a regular basis and the pressure of the water would soon grow to more than a mere leak. Such is the fate of good legends!

California ice is in a constant state of formation and disintegration and Lee Vining in particular is constantly changing. One day a small ice smear appears in a corner only to be gone the next week. Consequently many climbers delude themselves into believing that they are doing a “first ascent.” Few of these are and were most likely climbed a decade ago by a prior generation. Some however are genuine new ascents such as the icicles low in the canyon climbed in 2002 by Mammoth locals. January of 1997 was exceptional with heavy rain to high elevations and once the temperatures dropped ice coated all the walls and anything could be climbed. So stick around long enough and a genuine first ascent may be yours. The second however may have to wait another twenty years before it forms up again.

Approach

Take Highway 120 from just south of Lee Vining to the gated closure and turn left and then right onto the Lee Vining Canyon Road that parallels Highway 120. Follow this to its end at the Poole Power Plant. Park along the roadside. Do not park in the power plant parking lot. This road is not plowed on a regular basis and a heavy snowfall can close it for a day or two. Go through the power plant parking lot and pick up a trail beside the old green garage. Head up the canyon, crossing the creek, until the ice comes into view. If the trail is packed snow allow less an hour to reach the ice. Early season with thin snow cover the approach is a leg-breaking talus field. In soft deep snow conditions snowshoes are required and allow several hours for the approach.
**The Climbs**

The Bard - Harrington Wall is the first area you come to just above the narrows. While this has the best ice climbing in the canyon it forms up erratically and some years is fantastic; some years pure rock. Further up canyon are the two main falls that offer the most predictable climbing.

The left fall, the Main Falls, right of the Bard - Harrington Wall, is the longest but since it is not easily top roped is a lot less popular.

Beyond the Main Falls is The Central Falls, also known as the Chouinard Falls, is commonly toproped or led.

Names have been applied to some climbs, but the fact is that you can climb virtually any line to the top. Walk off easily up canyon, but watch out for avalanche danger from above.

**Other routes**

Across the canyon ice often forms up and can look enticing when the main side is crowded. However it takes a cold day to make it safe and any sun will send down ice and sometimes large boulders. Up high is sometimes the legendary Candlestick Park (WI5+) (see photo above) first climbed by locals Andy Selters and Greg Corliss in the phenomenal ice season of 1997. Richard Leversee and John Wasson completed the second ascent including a long whipper. There has been no recorded third ascent. It has not formed since and may never again in this lifetime unless there is a huge rainfall in January as happened that year.

---

**THE BARD - HARRINGTON WALL**

If this wall is in, and its ice coverage does vary every year, pick your line. Sometimes you will climb pure ice, in slimmer years you will have to do a lot of technical dry tooling. The difficulty ratings represent an average, expect these climbs to be sometimes harder and sometimes easier. Take six or so screws and a rock rack. The routes marked are the most popular lines, there are others here that have been climbed and some that haven’t. These routes are generally two or three pitches long.

This area typifies the name confusion at Lee Vining. This wall has long been known as the Bard-Harrington Wall after the route of the same name but neither Dale Bard or Bob Harrington actually claimed a first ascent here, nor did they climb together on this wall. Andy Selters and Dean Hobbs made an ascent of this route thinking it had been done before. Bob Harrington with Dean Hobbs and James Wilson also made several ascents up this wall. So recognising this confusion it is perhaps better to leave the name as the Bard-Harrington Wall as it is commonly known and in recognition of two of the areas’ finest climbers.

1. **Hobnail Boots** . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4+ 5.8
   The corner direct to a steep finish. Take some large cams.

2. **The Bard - Harrington** . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4+ 5.8
   Gain Hobnail Boots via the iced slabs.

3. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4+
   Low-angled ice to steep pillar to finish paralleling the corner.
   You can join Hobnail Boots at three-quarters height via a short traverse left.

4. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4+
   The right-hand finish to route#2

5. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4-
   Trend up left to an alcove and the top. Perhaps the easiest line on the wall.

6. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4+
   The central flow of this face.

7. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4+ 5.8
   A deep chimney/slot.

8. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . WI4+ 5.8
   A vertical pillar to a thin slab up a right-facing corner.
**THE MAIN FALLS**

For the experienced ice fiend there are some great multi-pitch-leads here both pure ice and mixed. You will need rock gear as well as screws for the mixed routes.

1. **Caveman**
   - WI4+
   - 220' - three pitches. The steeper flow on the right, 85 to 90+ degrees. This is probably the steepest climb in the canyon. There is a double bolt anchor below an overlap about 50' up that can provide an anchor for top roping the lower slabs.

2. **Center Left Flow**
   - WI3+
   - 120'. The left side of this flow. There is a bolted belay at the top at the base of some short corners.

3. **Center Right Flow**
   - WI3
   - 120'. The usually fat center flow with a bolted belay at three-quarters height.

4. **Left Flow**
   - WI4-
   - 240' - two pitches. A thin crack start to a ledge to join the next route, April Fool.

5. **Center Left Flow**
   - WI4
   - 240' - two pitches. Thin flows to a pillar and a mixed finish.

6. **Careless Torque**
   - WI5+ M5
   - 230' - two pitches. The usually fat center flow with a bolted belay at three-quarters height.

7. **April Fool**
   - WI4 M5
   - 280' - two pitches. Left-trending iced crack and ramp to join Heel Toe. This forms up best in late season.

8. **Caveman**
   - WI4
   - 250' - two pitches. Thinly iced corners and mixed climbing.

**CHOUINARD FALLS**

A great place for beginners. Set up top ropes by either leading one of the easier routes on the right or by going up the slope and traversing around to the top. The bolt anchors are marked.

9. **Spiral Staircase**
   - WI3-
   - 140'. This is the steepest line on the Chouinard Flow. Make this harder by dry-tooling the rock on the left at the start.

10. **Center Flow**
    - WI3+
    - 120'. The central flow. A belay is possible below the top at a pair of bolts.

11. **Center Left Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The left side of this flow. There is a bolted belay at the top at the base of some short corners.

12. **Center Right Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The often less steep right-side of the flow.

**RIGHT SIDE**

Good for beginners. Traverse easily to the cliff top to set up top ropes.

13. **Center Right Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The often less steep right-side of the flow.

14. **Center Left Flow**
    - WI3+
    - 120'. The left side of this flow. There is a bolted belay at the top at the base of some short corners.

15. **Center Flow**
    - WI3+
    - 120'. The central flow. A belay is possible below the top at a pair of bolts.

16. **Center Right Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The often less steep right-side of the flow.

17. **Center Left Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The left side of this flow. There is a bolted belay at the top at the base of some short corners.

18. **Center Right Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The often less steep right-side of the flow.

19. **Center Left Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The left side of this flow. There is a bolted belay at the top at the base of some short corners.

20. **Center Right Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The often less steep right-side of the flow.

21. **Center Left Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The left side of this flow. There is a bolted belay at the top at the base of some short corners.

22. **Center Right Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The often less steep right-side of the flow.

23. **Center Right Flow**
    - WI3
    - 120'. The often less steep right-side of the flow.
Horseshoe Falls at June Lake is a great place for beginners. The ice is not too steep but the climbs have some length, and the descent is a rappel. The volume of water coming down from the dam-controlled Agnew lake can create hollow ice that is completely detached from the rock. Leading this type of ice can be scary indeed. Later in the winter this area also starts to get a fair bit of sun deteriorating the ice even further. Saying all that if conditions are good and cold you will have a great day here. The nearby Tatum Falls are also very worthwhile.

**Approach**

In winter the June Lake Loop Road (Highway 158) is no longer a loop and the area is accessed via the turn off at June Lake Junction 15 miles north of Mammoth Lakes. Follow 158 for about 6 miles through the township of June Lake and to the gated closure just before Silver Lake. Park along the road not in the entry to the Rush Creek Power Plant or anywhere else on SCE property. (Ice climbing in California has this association with power generation).

Hike through the power plant parking area and find the tramline that climbs steeply upwards. This can be the crux of the day and wearing crampons up or down the tramline is not unknown. Follow this up to were it flattens out. Pass under a small metal and wooden arch over the tramline and after 200 more feet cut left towards the falls. A short rock step guards the approach and there is a fixed rope here to aid the scramble through the rock band. The approach should take about 45 minutes in good conditions. Once at the ice leave gear well away from the base on the rocks since a small collection area up high above the ice avalanches onto the base on a regular basis during snow storms. Climbers have had their gear totally buried here!

Tatum Falls is situated opposite and just before Horseshoe Falls, see the photograph on page 16.

**Descent**

The walk off descent can be long so most climbers rappel from the bolt anchor on the right or downclimb and rappel from a tree on the far left. The easiest descent is from the bolt anchors on the right. Two 60m ropes will get you all the way, two 50m ropes would get you down with some down-climbing. Over on the left two 50m ropes will get you down from the tree. It is also possible to downclimb with great care.
Tatum Falls
To the right (north) of the tramline as you walk up is Tatum Falls. These offer short pillar and low angled ice in between and are fun when the weather is cold. However this area does get a lot of sun and should not be climbed on when temperatures are warm.

Roadside Ice
Down low just past the gate closure on the road is the "Roadside Ice." This area is accessible and has produced good ice, but is on private Southern California Edison property and is as of this writing this area is closed. Do not climb here.
The ice at Parker Falls is about the same level of difficulty as that at June Lake’s Horsetail Falls, but better. There is more variety and the ice tends to be thicker, not hollow with water flowing underneath as is common at June. The routes are two pitches in length.

However the approach is long. Distance from the upper parking area to the ice is about 2.5 miles and about 2,000 feet in elevation gain. Allow 2-3 hours for the approach; longer if you park at the lower parking area.

This is another early season location to access before snow closes off the approach making it pretty difficult to get there. A four wheel drive with good clearance – forget the Subaru here – will make the approach even better. If have a two wheel drive you can still get there, but you will have to park at the main Parker Lake trailhead and walk an additional 1.7 miles and gain an extra 550 feet in elevation.

**Check The Ice From Highway 395 First**

Before committing yourself to the hike you can check the ice out from Highway 395 with a good pair of binoculars. Drive north on Highway 395 for 2.6 miles past the south turn off to June Lake and pull onto the shoulder just past the West Portal Road. Parker Canyon is the main canyon dropping from the Sierra Crest to the west and the ice can be seen high up, in the center of the drainage.

**Approach**

If it looks good continue north to the north end of the June Lake loop Road (Highway 198). There is a gate on the road that is closed once it snows, but assuming this to be open, go 1.3 miles to the good gravel road sign posted to Parker Lake.

Go another 1.3 miles and turn left on a smaller dirt road opposite a sign for Inyo National Forest. (Straight ahead will take you to the main Parker Lake trail in about a mile). Continue 1.8 miles to a junction and turn right. You will ford a small creek and after 1.1 miles come to the end of the road at a gate. A hundred feet before this a road heads right and stops at the creek. Park here; unless you are already walking due to snow cover.

Find the trail that crosses the creek and head up over the moraine ridge and then drop down to join the main Parker Lake trail and go to the lake.

From here the route will depend upon the prevailing conditions and snow coverage. There is an indistinct trail that contours around the south side of the canyon but can be hard to pick up. Failing this head to the north side of the canyon to avoid the thickest of the aspens and take a line over a small rock buttress and back down to the creek. Follow this up to the ice.

**Descent**

Descent is best by heading east from the top of the falls and circling back to the the base.

**Other Flows Nearby**

There are also a number of seeps on the north side of the canyon and The Cleft, a deep gully on the right forms some great ice. But all of these get sun, which the main falls do not, and need cold weather and an early morning ascent to be safe.
Other Winter Ice Areas

South Lake - The Tongue
The Tongue is the nearest ice climbing area to Bishop and is about a quarter mile before South Lake. The Tongue is an icy chimney/cleft that splits a clean rock face on the north side of the road above the ‘marsh’ of Weir Pond. At the top of this cleft is a convenient pine tree that can be used as a top rope anchor (use long slings). Approach by crossing the South Lake dam and contouring downstream on the hillside. If the road is closed it is about a pleasant 3 mile ski up the road to South Lake. This ice climb was first climbed by Bob Harrington in the early 80’s and is usually around WI 4.

The nearby Habegger’s Fall had been climbed for many years when conditions were good but it is now CLOSED to climbing as the owners of the new house at the base of the falls do not want people climbing here.

The Buttermilk
On Wrangler Rock in mid-winter, with a low snowfall. Drive past the Peabody boulders, turn right towards Y-boulder to the Backside parking area. Hike up the road and look to the right. If you’re lucky, you’ll find a 60 meter high, 4-6 feet wide ice streak that starts out vertical for first 12 feet.

Whitney Portal
The falls near the Whitney Portal Store are good place to practice. In early season with the Portal Road open the approach is very short; later when the road is closed it may not be worth it. The climbs are just up the creek from the end of the road.

Devil’s Postpile Area: Agnew Meadows
Up the San Joaquin River from Agnew Meadows there can be as many as 12 short flows that can provide climbs up 75 and 90 degrees. The routes lie above the east bank drainage on a band of cliffs facing southwest, between the upper and lower trails heading towards Thousand Island Lake. Routes have also been climbed in the vicinity of Rainbow Falls below Devils Post Piles. The approach for either area involves a significant amount of skiing down the Devil’s Postpile Road.

Carson Peak
Rob’s Ravine: FA: Rob Taylor and Jim Collins, mid-1970’s. This is the moderately steep gully that shoots up the north flank of Carson Peak, above June Lake. There are four or five distinct ice smears below and left of the main flow at base of Carson Peak, all within an eighth of a mile each of each other. Drive into housing subdivision called “Dream Mountain” before the Edison power station and park at bottom of U-shaped road loop. Walk through trees towards hillside for about 150 feet. Head left along base of slope to the climbs. Routes are 40 to 50 feet high. Above these routes is a two pitch route in a gully which sometimes provides good mixed climbing.

Alger Lakes Flow
FA: Pete Schurman and John Ellsworth, Feb. 1988. It is a long approach on cross country skis up Rush Creek above the power station then traversing over into Alger Canyon to Alger Lakes. The flow can reach 250 feet in width.

Tuolumne Meadows
With a rare combination of cold weather and a late closure of the Tioga road will give access to a one pitch ice climb on the right side of Drug Dome. The climb is plainly visible from Hwy.120 and offers thin ice over a steep slab.

ALPINE ICE

If you need any more convincing that the world is entering a warmer climate period then take a hike in the Sierra. The glaciers have shrunk a lot and the Palisade Glacier is but a sorry remnant of what it was a couple of decades ago. And as if that were not bad enough we are losing our snow and ice climbs. Climbs that were fat with ice a few years ago are showing the effects of low winter snow falls and long hot summers. Keep this in mind when reading route descriptions and looking at photos.

It seems as if the season for the gully climbs has moved more to late summer, rather than fall and by September many climbs have gone all together. Watch out for increased rock fall. As the snow melts back and the water starts running in the heat of the day dirt and loose rock that has not see daylight in hundreds of years is more than eager to fall down and complete the process of erosion.

Rock fall accidents in the Sierra have increased over the last few years so be careful. It is sad to see these mountains lose their snow and ice and sadder yet to realize that there is a good chance that we humans are to blame. The routes chosen and described in detail are Sierra Nevada classics and provide the most consistent conditions.

Other lesser known peaks and routes are listed starting on page 42.

Permits and Regulations
To spend a night camping whilst doing one of these climbs you will require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. For reservations call (760) 873-2483 and visit www.r5.fs.fed.us/inyo to educate yourself fully on backcountry regulations. It costs $5 to reserve an overnight wilderness permit and you have to pick them up in person from one of the Forest Service Visitor Centers listed below.

Alternatively you can get one on a first-come, first-served basis from any Forest Service Visitor Center in the area. In Bishop the WHITE MOUNTAIN RANGER STATION is open from 8 am to 5 pm daily for walk-in Wilderness Permits. Call them at (760) 873-2500. In the north go to the MAMMOTH LAKES RANGER STATION and Visitor Center situated on Highway 203 on the right as you enter Mammoth lakes about 3 miles west of Highway 395. They are open daily from 8am to 5pm and can be reached at (760) 924-5500. In the south, the MT. WHITNEY RANGER STATION in Lone Pine is also open daily from 8 am to 5 pm. There telephone number is (760) 876-6200.

In some wilderness areas all overnight users must use an approved bear-resistant canister. We recommend the use of bear canisters in all wilderness areas. Bear-resistant canister are available for rent and purchase from all Forest Service Visitor Centers and from the local climbing shops.
The north side of North Peak (12,242 ft) contains three gullies and couloirs that offer great introductory snow and ice climbs. All are easily done in a day from the car. The most commonly climbed is the furthest right of them all since it offers the best snow and ice and the most direct route to the summit. The climbing is great, the approach is easy, the descent equally so and the tremendous views of the Yosemite high country make this a great day’s outing in the mountains.

Where
North Peak lies above Saddlebag Lake just north of the Tioga Road, Highway 120.

Take the Tioga Road, either from Lee Vining on the east, or from Crane Flat on the west above Yosemite. A couple of miles to the east of the Tioga Pass entrance station is the Tioga Pass Resort and a half mile east of this is the gravel road to Saddlebag Lake.

When
Early season gives snow climbing and ski descents of the route are not unknown in May and early June. For climbers the best time is September till the winter’s snows arrive.

Strategy
You should get an early start on this route. It is not excessively long, but start early and beat any weather that might move in. If you want to make it a leisurely trip then camp at the north end of the lake. You can catch the boat over Saddlebag Lake for a small fee and then walk a short distance and camp, climb and catch the boat back. For doing the climb in a day you will probably need to start before the boat starts running. Also the boat stops late in the season. More importantly make sure that you have time to get a late afternoon snack at the Tioga Gas Mart near Lee Vining which offers the best meal you will ever get at a gas station. Try the fish tacos.

Equipment
Two ice tool, six ice screws (22mm), Snow pickets (only in early season) a small rock rack, 60m rope, helmets.
Permits and Regulations
For an overnight stay in this area you will need a wilderness permit. For details how to get one see page 21.

Approach
Park at the parking area at Saddlebag Lake opposite the dam. Cross the dam and take the trail around the west side of the lake. Once at the head of the lake continue on the trail (an old road actually) to the south end of Steelhead Lake. Cross to Cascade Lake and pass around it’s north side and climb steep grass and heather slopes to gain the higher bench of talus and slabs which are followed back to the moraines under the north side of the peak.

The Climb
The apron of snow at the base steepens gradually to the schrund, which normally poses few problems to cross. The best line tend to follow the right side of the gully and there are generally opportunities to belay in the moat on the rock as well as on the snow and ice. This line also gives the best protection from rock fall and ice falling from the leader’s tools.

Six pitches will take you to the col at the top. Stow the ice tools here and head up the rock towards the summit. There are many options here and climbing is generally 300 ft of fourth class with odd moves of fifth class, especially just below the summit. You will top out right on the summit.

Descent
Head down the ridgeline to the southwest on sand and talus towards the small peak on the crest. At about 11,700 ft cross the ridgeline and traverse down trending northeast towards the north most of the Conness Lakes. Pass around this on slabs on it’s west side and pick up a use trail that follows down the drainage on it’s north side towards Greenstone Lake. Cross the inlet above the lake and follow a trail that will join the Saddlebag Lake trail close to the lake. From here you are on familiar terrain and 1.5 miles from the parking lot; or five minutes from the boat landing.
MiniGUIDES

from rockfax.com

MOUNT DANA

The Dana Couloir

Dana has traditionally provided an easy first ice gully climb, with some seven pitches averaging about 40-45 degrees in steepness. In fall it often turns to a bubbly hard water ice. Take care when it is this boilerplate hard since although low-angle a single error can lead to a long scrapping fall as has happened to the careless.

Where

The trailhead is at Tioga Lake on SR.120, just short of a mile east of the Tioga Pass entrance station to Yosemite National Park and 11 miles from Lee Vining and Hwy.395. Park at the Tioga lake pullout (with bathroom) at the north end of the lake (9440 feet). Tioga Lake campground is located near the trailhead and the Tioga Pass Resort and store (www.tiogapassresort.com) is only 1/2 mile away offering gas, food, dining, accommodation and supplies....don’t miss the Tioga Pass Burgers!

When

Early season gives snow climbing and ski descents of the route are not unknown in May and early June. For climbers the best time is September till the winter’s snows arrive.

Strategy

You have two options and it is hard to say which is the better.

A single day climb is reasonable and it also means that you can pick up the trail from the summit and follow this back down towards the entrance station and back to the parking lot.

An overnight climb gives you the chance to enjoy the scenery and take more leisurely pace, but entails a more complex descent to recover your camp.

Either way the important thing is to make sure that you have time to get a late afternoon snack at the Tioga Gas Mart near Lee Vining which offers the best meal you will ever get at a gas station. Try the fish tacos.

Equipment

Take 4-6 ice screws in a couple of lengths. Snow pickets (only in early season). The rock is not good enough to be of much use, but if it makes you feel better take a couple of pieces. Most of your belays will be off natural features or ice screws. Slings and carabiners. A 50-55 meter rope is adequate and there is no need to run it out longer than this.

Approach And The Climb

The approach is cross country following a non-maintained trail.

From the parking area (9,750 ft) find the trail on the south side of the outhouse and drop about 70 feet to Tioga Lake. Follow the trail around the lake and contour and climb a little until you start to lose the trail a little. You will cross the creek to the N side at 9,840 ft and the trail will become better. Take this up a mile or so to the first basin with meadows at 10,380 ft.

Go around the meadow on the north side and follow a trail up through the rock slabs and talus away from the creek to the second meadow at 10,550 ft.

Keep following the drainage up across loose talus past one lake to camps on the northwest end of Dana Lake. (11,150 ft)

Go around the lake on the east side and gain the glacier, or whatever is left of it these days, and head up to the obvious couloir. Climb the ice, probably encountering rock and talus towards the top. Take a break here and then follow the ridge on class 2-3 loose rock to the summit with it’s outstanding views.

Descent

If you have no camp to pick up follow the use trail directly down towards the pass. Once past the rocky promontory locally known as Mt Ferdinand (after long time entrance station ranger who is said to have died from a broken heart after the Park Service dumped him for spending too much time talking to visitors) cut back towards the Tioga Lake parking area. If you have a camp to pick up follow the trial down to a small saddle at 12,150. Now cut directly down to Dana Lake via fourth class terrain over loose slabby rock. Take care through this until it eases off and put you back at camp. Retrace your steps down Glacier Creek.
**THE MENDEL COULOIRS**

**Mendel Couloir Right: III, WI 3, 1,000 ft**  
First climbed mixed using the rock on the sides of the gully to bypass the steeper sections. First complete ice ascent probably by Yvon Chouinard and Dean Moore in the late 1960's.

**Mendel Couloir Left: Ice Nine: IV, WI 5, 1,000 ft**  

The north face of Mount Mendel is a steep gloomy pace, but is also home to two of the most classic Sierra ice climbs. Mendel Right is the "must do" ice route in the Sierra and Mendel Left is the "hard" ice route. For a long time confusion reigned as to the difference between Mendel Left and the climb "Ice Nine" climbed by Doug Robinson and Dale Bard in 1976. They are the same climb!

But these two Mendel climbs have suffered maybe more than any others from melt out. Whereas in the 1980s Mendel Right offered wall to wall ice it now has simply gone in it's upper sections in late season. Mendel Left forms from snow melt from the summit snowfield and it is many years since it was "fat". But a good big winter with deep snowy and a not too warm summer will form it right up. So be ready....!

Historically Mendel Right was important in the development of climbing equipment.

After an epic attempt with Dennis Henneck in 1965, Yvon Chouinard wrote in his book "Climbing Ice."

"The thing that kept me going was thinking about how I was going to to go back to the shop and forge a hammer with a long thin pick with teeth on it for climbing ice. No more of this ice dagger bullshit for me."

Thus was born the revolution in ice tool technology that still continues today.

**Where**

You have to cross over the Sierra Crest to get to the Mendel Couloirs. The trailhead starts from the North Lake parking area out of Bishop. From the center of lovely downtown Bishop take East Line Street, past the Buttermilk and follow signs to Aspendell. A mile past Aspendell turn right on the side road to North Lake. Parking is by the Pack Station.

**When**

As with most Sierra ice climbs earlier seems better than later these days. August to September is best for Mendel Right and Mendel Left starts as snow in early season and gradually moves towards more rock as the summer progresses. Cold temperatures in September combined with snow still left on the summit will give the best chance of finding it in.

**Strategy**

You can these in a day, but better to go up in the afternoon, bivvy up near Lamarck Col, and then climb the peak and hike out on day two. You can descend to nice camps at the Lakes but then this means hauling your gear back up the 1,200-feet to the Col again.

**Equipment**

Ice screws, a small rock rack, 60m rope, helmets. 6-8 ice screws. For Mendel Left bring short ice screws.

**Permits and Regulations**

For an overnight stay in this area you will
need a wilderness permit for Lamarck Col. For details how to get one see page 21.

**Approach**

Hike the remainder of the road from the parking area to the campground at the end of the road and pick up the trail to Lamarck Lakes which heads southwest as opposed to the Paiute Pass trail that heads up northwest up the North Fork of Bishop Creek. The trail is good and well maintained for 2.75 miles to Upper Lamarck Lake (10,918 ft). Above this the trail deteriorates some but is still easy to follow as it switchbacks up the talus at the southwest end of the lake. Pass below a steep cliff and into an open sandy bowl. Follow this back for about a mile towards below Lamarck Col. About 1/4 mile before the Col the trail flattens and look for bivvy site here. There is a small lake below the snowfield at the final slope below the Col. This is about 4.75 miles from the parking lot.

Cross the col and drop down between the boulders and sandy slopes to between the topmost and second highest lakes in Darwin Canyon. This is a descent of over 1,200 ft. There are campsites here if you opt for these lower, but closer, campsites. As you descend look back and get a good idea of where you want to go on your return. Cut up the talus and moraine slopes to the small glacier at the base of the north face. As you come around below the face you will get your best views of the gulies. Mendel Right is... on the right. Mendel Left is on... the left. And who said climbing was hard!!

**Mendel Right**

A pretty obvious line. Climb straight up the middle. The rock on either side offers good belays. The crux is a cheekstone in the center of the gully that has a short step of 70 degree ice or some fifth class rock if it is melted out. The upper pitches may be melted out in late season and eventually you get to the col at the top. Above this there is a short chimney up the rock to the summit. 5.4, but easily climbed in heavier boots.

**Mendell Left - Ice Nine**

Climb over the schrund which is normally pretty straightforward and head upward on the neve. The apron of snow steadily narrows and you may have two choices. If there is plenty of ice then the narrow direct gully may be the best line. If this is melted out trend right slightly until the snow ends and cross rock ledges to below a big cheekstone. This can be the crux and may be rock or a vertical ice curtain. Above this the narrow gully twists upwards. Often four feet wide and with 80 degree steps the climbing can be superb here. You will exit pretty much right onto the summit.

**The Descent**

Head south along the summit plateau several hundred feet looking over the edge for the easiest way down. You will find a short chimney that leads down to ledge systems that are followed to lower angle talus and rock slabs. Drop down to the small lakes at the head of Darwin Canyon. Once below these you can start to contour towards Lamarck Col, but there is not too much point in contouring too early since it will involve more effort than you will save by dropping a little lower. Lamarck Col is hard to see from this side. It is not the first two passes you traverse below – cross these and you will be in the Sabrina drainage and not close to where you want to be. Hopefully you checked it out on the way in. This is going to feel like a long way; and it is. Stagger into camp, pack up and head to the bright lights of Bishop.

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The northeast couloir of Mount Gilbert (13,106 ft) isn’t one of the ‘big names’ of Sierra ice routes. However this is one of the best and one that deserves more attention than it generally gets. The approach is short (for a Sierra climb), the climbing continuous and the descent pretty straightforward. It was first climbed by Al Fowler, Ron Cale, and Dan Eaton in 1972 in mixed conditions. Later Yvon Chouinard and Henry Barber climbed this route in ice-only conditions.

**Where**

Mount Gilbert is on Sierra crest and is approached from South Lake. Take East Line street from the center of Bishop and head west on it past the Buttermilks. About 15 miles up the road take the left turn to South Lake and the parking area.

**Parking**

In mid summer this is pretty limited at the headroad. Get there later in the day on a weekend and you will not find any. Instead you will have to drop off your pack and drive back down to below Parchers Resort and hike back to the roadhead.

**When**

As with most Sierra ice climbs earlier seems better than later these days although this gully seems to be standing up to global warming better than many others. August to September is best for ice. Go earlier if you want to climb snow.

**Strategy**

This climb can be done in a day if you start early and move steadily making it a realistic day trip for many climbers. However if you want to take life a little more leisurely then hike in late in the day to camp at Lake 10,668 ft. Next day climb and return to camp, pick it up and head to Bishop for dinner.

**Equipment**

Two ice tools, six ice screws, Snow pickets (only in early season) a small rock rack, 60m rope, helmets.
Permits and Regulations
For an overnight stay in this area you will need a wilderness permit for Treasure Lakes. For details how to get one see page 21.

Approach
From the South Lake parking lot take the Bishop Pass Trail around the lake about 3/4 miles to the turnoff to Treasure Lakes. Leave the Bishop Pass Trail on the Treasure Lakes Trail as it contours across the south side of South Lake, crosses the main drainage and then climbs up the hillside. If you are on a day trip look for the point where the trail crosses from the north side back to the south at about 10,366 ft. Leave the trail here and pick a route up the slabs and rock to the west aiming to cross ridge just below where it starts to steepen significantly (about 11,320 ft). If camping head up on the Treasure Lakes Trail to the first lakes and find a campsite (10,688 ft). In the morning you will head northwest across the slabs to meet the ridge at the same lower angle point at about 11,320. Contour horizontally west into the drainage emanating from the small glacier below Mt. Gilbert. Cut the corner to the upper lake and head on to the glacier below the peak.

The Climb
The gully is pretty obvious, ending up just west of the actual summit. The bergschrund generally presents little problem but often the slopes below the gully are quite icy (a good thing!) and despite the low angle, caution, a belay, and probably both are advised. The first few rope lengths are best belayed from the right side of the gully and fixed anchors will usually not be found. After several rope lengths the gully narrows and belays will be better protected from falling ice if they are placed on the left side of the gully. Often the ice is good enough to provide ice screw belays and these are advised as the rock is often poor quality. The crux ice pitches are at the top of the gully and in good years these last two pitches approach 65° and are smooth, green, and narrow. The fun's not over yet though; one rock pitch with some loose rock and some 5.6 - bring a 2” piece - out of the gully on the climber's left (relative to the ice climb) bring you to the final steps to the summit.

Descent
Head east across the summit plateau and drop down the bowl on the southeast side of Gilbert aiming for the low point of the slope. This is mostly easy sand slopes but large talus protects the final approach to the small pass which is left of a small pointed peak (12,490 ft). Cross the ridge at about 12,400 ft and drop down a small snow slope (may be melted out completely or may be hard blue ice; this pass often requires a 50° rappel. This gully is quite visible from the trailhead parking lot and appears from there as a slightly diagonal snow ramp on the Crest left of Gilbert) and aim for a small high lake (elevation 11,600 ft) west of Treasure Lakes. From this lake contour east onto the ridge and work your way down this ridge. Drop directly into the lake basin from the inlet end, near some steep cliffs, or continue working down the ridge that separates the descent drainage from the Treasure Lakes drainage, finally traversing around the ridge a couple of hundred feet above the lake.

Alternate camps
If you choose to do the climb as a multi-day affair there are some excellent camp sites at the lakes below Gilbert. In particular, the largest, lowest lake offers excellent sites at it's outlet end. The obvious benefit is proximity to the climb; the obvious downside is the fact that you’d have to climb back up to camp to pack out. There does exist the possibility of rappelling off the ridge directly back into this basin but at this writing a rappel route has not been established. This route would leave the East Ridge of Gilbert at a point that is even with the east end of the Gilbert Glacier and would probably require two full rope length rappels.
In early spring, all these routes will probably be snow filled. In late spring and summer you will encounter more ice. All these routes require rock protection as well as a handful of ice screws.

**Where**

The North Palisades are situated west of Big Pine, 15 miles south of Bishop and are approached via the north fork of Big Pine creek from Glacier Lodge trailhead. This trailhead is 11 miles west of Big Pine up Glacier Lodge. From Glacier Lodge it is 6 miles along the north fork of Big Pine creek to Temple Crag and 11 miles to the Palisade Glacier. A mountain lodge that can accomodate up to 80 climbers is being built at Glacier Lodge. They plan to break ground in the spring of 2004.

**When**

For rock climbing the season begins in June and extends to the first snows, usually anytime between September and December. In the winter the Palisades are the holy shrine of California backcountry skiing. The Clyde Couloir and, U and V - Notch are usually climbed in summer and fall when there is a good chance of neve and ice, rather than post-holing through early season snow. Some prefer later in the season when the snow has melted and the freeze-thaw cycle begins forming blue ice in these couloirs. The downside then is the bergschrund is more pronounced and can be trickier to overcome.

**Strategy**

Although these routes can be done in a day from the trailhead most parties prefer to camp and acclimatize. The best base camps are near the glacier below Mount Gayley. Sam Mack Meadow is probably too low a camp for most climbers. On the route day get an early start, to hopefully avoid any stone fall, and return to camp the same day.

**Special Equipment**

As always come prepared for inclement weather. It can snow in August. Bring crampons and two axes, your standard alpine rack to 3” (bring some extra slings) and five or six ice screws. Don’t forget glacier goggles and sun block. You can get away with one axe on U - Notch early in the season, but later when this chute is mainly ice bring two.
Permits and Regulations
For an overnight stay in this area you will need a wilderness permit for the north fork of Big Pine Creek. For details how to get one see page 21.

Mountain Guides: Sierra Mountain Center
If you require a mountain guide for alpine route in the Sierra Nevada call Sierra Mountain Center run by SP Parker and Todd Vogel. Call them at (760) 873-8526 and a visit to their website is a must www.sierramountaincenter.com

Approach: to Glacier Lodge trailhead and camping from Big Pine
In Big Pine, turn west on Crocker Street between the Mobile and Texaco Gas Stations. Continue up into the mountains for 11 miles until you see the sign for Big Pine Creek Campground and Glacier Lodge. At Glacier Lodge there are several Forest Service Campgrounds (reservations (877) 444-6777) and the excellent Glacier Lodge Resort (www.jewelofthesierra.com) where you will find a campground ($15), cabins ($70 a night) and a small convenience store (open 7am - 8pm).

At the time of writing the construction of a mountain hut at Glacier Lodge to accommodate 60 - 80 people is planned for the spring of 2004.

Parking
For a day ascent park at the last parking area just before the gate and the start of the trail. Overnight parking is lower down the road. You will get a ticket for overnight parking at the roadhead.

Approach: Glacier Lodge to Sam Mack Meadow
The trail up the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek is a beautiful hike in its own right and very simple to follow (see map). There are two alternatives in the initial part of the hike. 1. From the hiker parking area take the trail that climbs constantly as it contours the south facing hillside. This can be hot in summer OR 2. From the roadhead go around the gate through the cabins and pick up the trail after the last cabin. Cross the bridge and turn right up switchbacks (the south fork trail goes straight ahead). This emerges onto an old roadbed. Follow this up the north fork over a bridge to just past the bridge to switchbacks that head up the slope to join the high trail (the first option) via a short switchback or continue up the road following the creek for a while to switchbacks that join the higher trail higher up the canyon. You will pass waterfalls and eventually an old stone house that used to belong to the Hollywood star Lon Chaney, it is now a Ranger Refuge. You are deposited after about 5 miles at First and Second Lakes and a fine view of Temple Crag. Continue on the main trail passing Third Lake to a left turn over a creek, posted Sam Mack Meadow, up talus to the sheltered canyon that is Sam Mack Meadow.

Camping - Sam Mack Meadow
Sam Mack Meadow is a camping option for climbing routes off the Palisade Glacier but may be too low for many. Please pack your poop and any other waste out with you, sanitation is a serious issue here. Bear cannisters are obligatory. Take extra care not to trash the area and do not disturb the rare yellow-legged frogs that dwell here.
**Approach from Sam Mack Meadow to the Gayley Camp**

From Sam Mack Meadow take a sharp left across the stream and head up a winding trail (the Glacier Trail) through stunted pines and small cliffs. The trail starts to traverse left and eventually hits a loose boulder moraine. There are several lines of cairns leading through the boulders all of which emerge onto superb glaciated slabs. Follow the slabs upwards following numerous cairns to a point overlooking the glacier and below the north face of Mount Gayley. This point is marked by numerous platforms for bivy sites. Water can be an issue here in late season.

**Gayley Camp to the Palisade Glacier**

Drop down loose talus and moraine to gain the glacier. Either make a beeline up the glacier for your route of choice being careful of any cravasses, or contour round the left (south-side) of the glacier towards Glacier Notch and then back right to your route of choice.

**U - Notch WI3 5th class To North Palisade**

The bergschrund at the base of the U - Notch is often the crux of the climb, especially during drought years. If the bergschrund is open, climb the easy class 5 rock to the right of it. Once in the couloir climb several pitches, keeping left at the rocks to the notch at the top of this chute. Protection can be rigged in the gully walls as well as on the snow slope. Once you reach the top of the chute there is a chimney/dihedral on your right, rated 5.4. Climb the chimney to the summit ridge, dropping in to a small bowl briefly and then up boulders to the exposed summit of North Palisade. The traverse to the summit can be tricky especially early season if there are patches of snow around, and it is surprisingly longer than most expect.

**Descent**

Descend the summit ridge back to the top of the chimney where there should be rappel slings. Rap down the chimney, two rappels back to the top of U - Notch. You can either down climb the U - Notch or rappel it. Many prefer to downclimb if the snow in the gully is good as it is relatively straightforward and a lot quicker (and warmer) than rappelling. If you do rappel there are plenty of rappel slings at intervals down the chute on the skiers left side.

**V - Notch WI3+ 5th class To Polemonium Peak (and/or Mount Sill)**

Again the bergschrund is thought to be the crux of the climb and most take it slightly left of center. It can be steep. Look for snow bridges and be prepared to climb several feet of near vertical neve or ice. Follow the left side of couloir for first 4 pitches, then cross to right side to the top. Pitches 3-5 are definitely exposed to rock fall. There are around 8 pitches in total. Protection and belays are ice screws supplemented by rock gear where you can. Scramble up the ridge toward the summit of Polemonium Peak. Just before summit drop down to the west down a gully for 60 ft and then climb back up to gain the west ridge which is followed for about 200 ft to the summit. Alternatively you can summit Mount Sill to the east.

**Descent**

Unless you are forced to by bad weather or an emergency it is not recommended that you descend the way you came as the anchors are poor. The descent from the V - Notch involves traversing the crest toward Mount Sill. Once near Mount Sill descend to the notch behind Apex Peak and the L-Shaped snowfield next to Mount Sill which can either be mostly rock or snow depending on the year. There are rappel opportunities if needed and keep your axe handy.

**Clyde Couloir WI3+ 5th To Starlight Peak**

This chute is renowned for rock fall and is best climbed in early season. The crux is quite frequently crossing the bershund to gain access to Clyde Couloir. This barrier can be up to 20 ft of vertical ice. Once in the couloir it can reach 75 degrees in the narrow center section. The crux pitch gives way to the 40-45 degree upper gully, which in late spring will probably be snow filled. In late spring or early summer you can find it covered over with ice. This heads straight towards the summit of North Palisade. The final 200 feet is enjoyable 5.8 rock climbing that leads to the summit.

**Descent**

Rappel and down climb the route or traverse North Palisade to U-notch.
The Underhill Couloirs to Starlight or Thunderbolt Peaks

This snow gully offers possibly the most interesting route to either the summit of Thunderbolt Peak or Starlight and if you are fast, both of them in the same day.

At the far northwest corner of the Palisade Glacier there are two couloirs split by a rock rib. The left one of these was the route of the first ascent in 1931 by a big group comprising pretty much all of the notable climbers of the day; Robert Underhill, Norman Clyde, Bestor Robinson, Francis Farquhar, Glen Dawson, Lewis Clark and Jules Eichorn. This route has fallen into disfavor because of the quantity of loose rock and the right is now the preferred route of choice. Climb this in early season when it is full of snow since a late season ascent on the loose rock is unpleasant at best.

Cross the glacier, cross the schrund, which usually presents little problem, and enter the right hand couloir. Climb this on snow, the crux being a boulder that sometimes melts out. It is possible to climb ledges and talus on the right side, but snow will offer a much better and safer alternative. Towards the top the snow will run out and there will be about a rope length of rock climbing to the ridgeline. Since this section is loose position your belayer safely and if there are others on the route in front consider waiting until they are up.

Leave your snow and ice gear here and choose your peak.

Descent

There is a rappel anchor at the top of the notch just on the east side. Make a couple more rappels down the couloirs down climbing where you can and if need be traverse onto the ledges on the side of the gully.

Starlight Peak. 5.4

Some tricky routefinding. Climb the ridge towards the south and then move onto the east side a little to gain the notch before the first of two pointed towers. Pass this tower on the west side and continue along the ridge towards the second tower. Traverse this on the west side too and then back on the ridge. Once the ridge steepens traverse on the west side making a tricky step around a corner to a big ledge just above the big gully coming up from the west side of the peak. Climb a wide crack and then a thin move up a slab to good holds puts you in an area of talus. Above this there is a shorter pitch to below the "Milkbottle" summit block. The summit register is here. If you want to climb the actual Milk Bottle there are a few alternatives. You can climb the exposed south ridge with no protection at 5.4 and the prospect of a bad fall if you blow it. The other alternative is to lasso the summit of the block and prussik up the rope. What seems to work is this.

From the east side of the "Milkbottle" throw a rope over the left side of the summit towards the west. Get the end and bring it back to the east side so that the rope loops around the tiptop of the block. Tie a small figure eight on the slack side of the rope, put a locking carabiner to the loop, clip it to the end strand and then pull in slack from the end, sliding the carabiner up to the summit and giving you a strand to carefully prussik. (Doing it this way allows you to apply tension to the rope as you slide it up) There are slings around the summit. Use these to get off and do not place any bolts. Norman Clyde didn’t need any so neither do you!!

Descent

Once back below the block start off down the way you came up. Downclimb the route to just the area of talus and look for an anchor. Rappel past the slab and wide crack to the top of the big west side gully. Drop down the gully for several hundred feet to a point where you can climb back up on the right to regain the ridge-line between the two rock towers you past on the way up. Whatever you do, do not continue too far down the gully and if you make any rappels in this gully you have gone too. The continuation of the gully is plain ugly! Once back on the ridge crest retrace your steps back to the top of the Underhill Couloir.

Thunderbolt Peak

At 14,003 feet Thunderbolt barely makes it as a fourteener. However it’s monolithic summit block adds a level of technical difficulty above the other peaks in this category and this was the last of the fourteeners to be climbed in the Sierra. The register is generally below the summit block but it is not unknown for some callous climber in an attempt to display their superiority and hang it from the summit bolts. The summit block involves 5.8 climbing on the west face; the traditional first ascent method of your partner standing braced against the east side as you climb first onto their shoulders and then onto the friction slab (the taller the partner the better); or more rope shenanigans to toss a rope over the summit block and a prussik up from the east side once the rope is anchors on the west side. All good clean fun.

From the top of the Underhill Couloir ascend a fractured slab up and left to where the wall steepens. Climb this in a long rope-length to where the ridge flattens just to the east of a tower. Traverse the ridge northwards stopping at a pointed little tower just before the ridge drops off. Traverse the south face of the tower to the west stopping below the summit block. Now is the time to choose your ascent method to the very summit.

Descent

Retrace your steps making one rappel back to the top of the fractured slab and then a rappel or downclimb of the slab it’s self into the notch.
More Alpine Ice In The Sierra Nevada

There are many options and this is a selection of the best, listed from south to north.

Mount Irvine

The east couloir, easy to moderate angle snow above Meysan Lakes. An early season climb of up 30 degree slopes to Class 2 talus. Descend the same way.

Mount Hitchcock

Couloirs on the northeast face, good in early season.

Split Mountain

Above Red Lake the east face of Split Mountain has several large buttresses and couloirs. The main one of these starts from the high point of the talus and ends at the notch between the south and the north summits. FA: 1930 by Norman Clyde. There are several variations. The initial steep ice was first climbed by Bob Harrington in 1981. Higher up is a steep rock band that Harrington avoided by climbing a snow chimney on the left. This band was later climbed directly via a 70 degree water ice pitch by Yvon Chouinard, Richard Leversee, and James Wilson. Hard to find in good ice condition and not to be attempted when temperatures are warm since it is subject to plenty of rockfall. Further to the right is the St Jean Couloir climbed by Bill St Jean in 1981. This holds snow well into the season and offers 40 degree neve climbing to part way up the north slopes of the peak. A short step in the gully can be avoided by climbing the rock to the right.

The Thumb

Northwest couloir. FA Norman Clyde 1930. A short gully leading to the west ridge and the easy slopes on the south side of the peak.

Disappointment Peak

The northeast couloir is yet another Clyde route and is the right of two gullies above the Middle Palisade glacier. Partway up a traverse leads to the notch south of the summit.

Temple Crag

The Mendenhall Couloir is a deep slot left of the massive north buttress. It is a great spring climb, but subject to horrible rockfall later in the season. You should experience 40 degree neve with some chockstones to surmount.

Thunderbolt Peak

The north couloir gives an easy route to the summit from the Thunderbolt Glacier and was descended (Norman Clyde again!) before it was ascended. About 1,000 feet of 30 degree snow.

Mount Agassiz. East Ridge and Couloir

A 45 degree ice/snow couloir. Take left couloir leading up from the small glacier northeast of the peak up to a col. Follow the east ridge to summit.

Mount Thompson

West of Mount Gilbert above South Lake this face is obvious from the parking lot. There are three couloirs and since Norman Clyde climbed the peak more than 50 times it is probable that he did the first ascents. The steepest gully is in the middle of the face with a crux is passing a large chockstone

Clyde Spires


Mount McGee

Mount McGee is the peak northwest of Muir Pass. The North Chute, first climbed by Glen Dawson, Jules Eichorn, Charles Dodge and John Olmstead in 1930, climbs to the notch between the west and central peaks.
Mount Darwin
On the north side of Mount Darwin is the Darwin Glacier and this tapers down to first an apron of snow and then a thin snow tongue. The tongue splits and you can take the left escape to the Northeast Ridge of the right branch to just below the summit plateau. Great snow with some water ice at the top. Descend the west ridge until it is possible to rappel back to the glacier.

Mount Haeckel North Gully
About 900 feet of 50 degree snow and ice first climbed in 1971 by Yvon Chouinard and Choong-Ok.

Mount Lamarck
The North Couloir is the right of two couloirs on the face first climbed by John Fisher and Jay Jensen in 1974.

Glacier Divide
South of Paiute Pass this area has several 600-700 foot high snow and ice gullies.

Feather Peak
First climbed by Mike Graber and Alan Bartlett in 1976 this is up to 60 degree neve and ice in late season. A long hike up the Pine Creek Trail past Royce Lakes. A short Class 3 ridge leads to the summit from the top of the gully.

Point 13,121
WI3, 800 feet, 50 degrees. This peak is about a mile southeast of Mount Humphreys above the south fork of McGee Creek. There are two gullies. The left is the lowest angles and is Kindergarten Chute with about 800 feet of 40 degree neve and water ice. Hidden back on the right is Checkered Demon (First ascent by Doug Robinson and John Fisher, 1970.) The rock here is a fractured lime-stone and the gully steadily narrows and steepens to rock climbing at the top. If this formed up on a regular basis it would be one of the local classics. But these days it seems to melt out quickly and rarely gives good ice.

Mount Emerson
A 1,000 foot 40 degree snow and ice couloir (Norman Clyde again, in 1926). An early season route since it melts out and has a lot of rockfall.

Mount Humphreys
The North Couloir is a moderate 45 degree gully from above Langly Reservoir to the north ridge on one of the Sierra’s great peaks. This is a reasonable day climb. Do it early season when the lower moraines are snow covered. The original 1929 route of Walter Starr took the right hand fork after the initial couple of hundred feet. The best variation, and not really any steeper is to continue up the main gully to the notch. When you climb this think of Allan Bard and Tom Carter skiing this narrow Karhu skis in the early 1980s. The North Ridge is mainly 4th class and is started up a broad trough. At the top of this cut left to gain the ridge and continue to the summit.

Wheeler Peak
This is the prominent peak above Kenneth Lake in the Rock Creek drainage and the Northwest Couloir is a pleasant one day climb. Start from Rock Creek Lake on the Kenneth and Dorothy Lake trail. The gully on the right side of the peak is obvious and has a short vertical step part way up. Most of the gully is about 45-50 degrees. Descend towards Black Lake.
First ascent; SP Parker 1982

Mount Dade
The North Face was once a fun ice climb but this has melted out a lot. A lower apron of 45-50 degree snow leads to mixed climbing directly to the summit. The Hourglass offers a 800 foot, 40 degree snow to the upper talus slopes and is a good one day introductory snow climb.

Red Slate Mountain
At the head of the Convict Lake drainage there is a striking narrow couloir shooting up for about 1,000 feet at a maximum of about 40 degrees. A long one day and a short two day route in a beautiful area. For the descent head down the west side to Constance Lake. This has become a popular spring test piece ski descent.

Mount Morrison
Tucked in behind the corner between the North Butress and visible from Highway 395 near the airport is the Medenhall Couloir. If this was actually climbed in 1931 by John Mendenhall, as history claims, it would have been an outstanding route for its time. The line is obvious but steep and with plenty of loose dangerous rock. An ascent in 1975 by Yvon Chouinard, Dennis Hennick, and Doug Robinson found rock climbing over the steep and very loose rock band above the snow tongue with snow climbing above. Andy Selters and John Dittlii climbed the route in 1996 via several hundred feet of thinly iced slabs (WI-3-4).

Bloody Mountain
This gully is visible from the junction of Highway 395 and the 206 to Mammoth. Take the four wheel drive Sherwin Creek Road as far as you can drive which in a good season is very close to the base. The gully is 40-45 degrees around a bulge three quarters of the way up. Descend the east ridge and then drop back down to the north east and pick up the road again. This has become another spring ski descent for the brave.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Robert “SP” Parker, originally from New Zealand, has lived and climbed in the Eastern Sierra and the Sierra Nevada for nearly 25 years. He is co-owner, with Todd Vogel, of the Bishop based mountain guide company, Sierra Mountain Center. SP is certified by the American Mountain Guides Association in Rock, Ski and Alpine disciplines and also has international IFMGA certification. He has climbed extensively in Patagonia, Alaska and the European alps, as well as all over the USA, but always returns to the Sierra Nevada which is home.

ABOUT THIS GUIDEBOOK
We originally planned to produce a small online guide to the Eastern Sierra’s popular waterfall ice areas Lee Vining and June Lake but the project grew. First to include alternatives to these areas and then to include the alpine ice of the Sierra Nevada. If this first edition, only available online, becomes popular we plan to produce a color print guide to ice climbing in California. If you have purchased this online guide we will email you when this print guide is available and offer you a discount off the retail price. Thank you for supporting us and we hope this guide helps you to have fun.

Robert “SP” Parker
MORE ALPINE ICE

SP on Denali. photo: Mimi Bourquin

Mick Ryan