

THE COLD BLUE YONDER

Steeped in lore, these seven ice lines are true Northeast gems

TEXT BY
PETER
DOUCETTE

PHOTOS BY
BERND
ZEUGSWETTER

Pinnacle Gully **(III NEI 3)**

HUNTINGTON
RAVINE,
NEW HAMPSHIRE

Majka Burhardt (leading) and Caroline Gleich approach the top as the weather closes in. On a rare day a climbing team can pack tools away here and hike for the summit. More often, however, in cresting the top of the ravine, you are met with Mount Washington's crippling combination of arctic cold and wind gusts from the northwest, forcing an immediate descent.

Pinnacle Gully is an aesthetic and technical focal point of winter climbing on Mount Washington, first climbed in 1929 by Samuel A. Scoville and Julian Whittlesey. The first ascent without the painstaking task of cutting steps was completed in 1970 by Jim McCarthy, Rick Wilcox, Rob Wallace and Carl Brandon, with the party spending just five hours on the route. Both ascents were historic, ushering in a higher standard of climbing not just for the wind-stripped landscape of New England's highest peak, but nationally. "Jim led fearlessly," says Wilcox, "having borrowed my new axes, which he removed from my pack at the base of the route and returned to me after we topped out."



Black Dike
(IV NEI 5-)

CANNON CLIFF

Hjördis Rickert contemplates the ever-steepening *Black Dike* from the first of its three pitches.

Anyone who has ventured onto Cannon in winter (or summer, for that matter) knows it's a fickle creature. Many have heard the story of 18-year-old John Bouchard soloing the first ascent of the *Black Dike*, in 1971, dropping his mitten, ice tool and eventually, when it got stuck, the rope with which he'd self-belayed, before he topped out in a full-on blizzard. Few people remember that this all took place in mid December before the official start of winter! Just over a year later, John Bragg, Rick Wilcox and Henry Barber marched to the base of the climb and followed Bouchard on the second ascent, confirming the ascent and the quality and severity of the route, the first Grade 5 in the region. As Wilcox says, "That was the first route of John's triple crown on Cannon." The others were *Fafnir* and *Omega*.



Omega
(IV NEI 5+)

CANNON CLIFF,
NEW HAMPSHIRE

Adam Bidwell enjoys prime conditions in early morning light on a rare April ascent. A preceding cold rain had cascaded over colder granite to form the route in roughly 48 hours. Magical.

Brilliantly gold and ever a prize when caught in condition, *Omega* is 400 rope-stretching feet, bottom to top. First climbed by John Bouchard and Rainsford Rouner in 1976, *Omega* epitomizes the word ephemeral—here one day and gone the next, or even on the same day! Due to the route's easterly exposure, many suitors have seen this route fall apart in the hour it takes to approach from the car. Even in the best of conditions the climb calls for confidence, skill and a cool head.
PHOTO: Peter Doucette

The Promenade
(IV NEI 5+)

LAKE
WILLOUGHBY

Majka Burhardt makes the all-important stab above the old fracture on *The Promenade's* crux second-pitch curtain.

The first ascent of *The Promenade*, in 1977, by Peter Cole and the Rouner brothers, Rainsford and Tim, stands as a testament to the kind of steep, no-holds-barred ice climbing at "The Lake" in the late 1970s when progress could include aiding off a tool or screw, and ascents might be sieges requiring fixed ropes and a second day. In the early 1980s, though, these grade 5 and 5+ routes were climbed quickly and all free using the secret weapons of the day—Simond Chacal tools and Lowe Footfangs.

Today bashing your knuckles with straight-shafted tools is no longer a part of the game. Each evolution of equipment continues to shape the experience of climbing ice and mixed ground. Yet the medium is still as fragile and exposed as it was 40 years ago. The sensation of committing to a feature that has a seasonal lifespan is alive and undiminished.



Mindbender
(II NEI 5+)

LAKE
WILLOUGHBY,
VERMONT

The name says it all. *Mindbender*, done in 1977 by Clint Cummins and John Imbrie, is a sustained and daunting line that forms a little differently every season—though it's always massive. Its left margin, *Call of the Wild*, climbed free in 1996 by Jim Shimberg, was among the first Grade 6's in the Northeast, where 5+ had held a long reign at the top of the scale.

In this photo, Bernd Zeugswetter guns for the relative comfort of the belay cave two-thirds of the way up *Mindbender*. Although *Mindbender* may be climbed in a single 70-meter pitch, it remains steep no matter how you slice it. **PHOTO: Hjördís Rickert**





Repentance
(III NEI 5)

CATHEDRAL
LEDGE,
NEW
HAMPSHIRE

When they are in condition, the ice climbs on Cathedral Ledge are where it's at, rewarding a rock-climber's eye and acute sense of movement. *Repentance* is a case in point: Climbing the storied classic is a precise act, made in many small moves, often in tight spaces. In lean conditions, much of the important protection is rock gear.

John Bragg and Rick Wilcox made the first ascent in 1973 and instantly knew they'd climbed something special. When Bragg revealed his intended climb on the day of the FA, Wilcox thought, *We're either going to die, or this is going to be great!* Wilcox also recalls that Bragg broke the picks on two of the six axes they carried.

"We practically had a golf bag of tools up there with us," he says. "John would break a tool, and I'd send him up another one."

Repentance went in four pitches using Chouinard Zeros, with North Wall hammers as third tools. It didn't take long for other climbers to recognize the quality of the line. Yvon Chouinard and Henry Barber claimed the route's third ascent, a feat nearly three decades ahead of its time—they did it without leashes.

Here, Bernd Zeugswetter finds the route in anemic conditions sure to make the off-balance entrance to pitch two a strenuous, sequential endeavor.

PHOTO: Hjördis Rickert



Green Chasm
(III NEI 3 5.6)

MOUNT
WEBSTER,
NEW HAMPSHIRE

Majka Burhardt stretches out the rope mid-*Chasm* to escape the deep freeze. This alpine-ice objective, established in 1989 by Kurt Winkler and Peter Gamache, has a ski-mountaineering option when snow conditions cooperate. You enter the *Green Chasm* after a 1,400-foot approach and an unmistakable rock step that goes at snow-plastered 5.6. Inside of its confines, the *Chasm* feels like the wildest meat locker you will ever walk through. At times it is less than 20 feet across with walls over 150 feet high on either side. You'll gain 2,000 feet in total and likely have this hidden gem to yourself. Indeed, the *Green Chasm* absorbs the climber like few other routes in the White Mountains. It's easy to forget the car is only a mile away.

Crawford Notch, the southern terminus of the Presidential Range, is home to ice climbs of all lengths and grades. It includes a diverse selection from 2,500-foot gullies on the western aspect of Mount Webster, to Mount Willard's satisfying, mostly moderate offerings; to the well-loved "cragging" atmosphere of Frankenstein Cliffs. Whether you're looking for M8 test pieces or lengthy Grade 2 classics, you can find them here.

BELOW: Caroline Gleich and Burhardt lay down a few turns as they head for home. Leave it to a couple of multi-disciplinary pros to plan ahead and climb *Green Chasm* in ski boots to make the most of their day. The greater Northeast is among the most accessible and reliable playgrounds for ice and mixed climbing anywhere, just remember to show up ready for anything, and you'll find just what you're looking for.

