

Loft Ice Climb by Dave Cooper



In this view from Mills Moraine, the Loft ice can be seen left of center immediately below the snowfield-small.jpg

Sometime around the beginning of October, smears of ice start to form over rock faces at the highest elevations. Created by the alternating melting and freezing of available water sources such as early season snowfall, it takes just the right mix of moisture and climate to build the ice into something climbable.

While some of these ice smears form reliably each autumn, others may only appear once in a decade. It is almost a rite of autumn for ice climbers to head up to Rocky Mountain National Park to hunt for these elusive beasts. Some climbs form for just a few days before the dry winds cause the ice to sublime

Getting to the Trailhead: The access road to the Longs Peak Ranger Station is located 6.4 miles north of Allenspark, or approximately 9 miles south of Estes Park, on Highway 7. Drive a mile west up the access road and park in the large, paved parking lot by the ranger station. Rocky Mountain National Park fees are not collected at this location.

Statistics: From the trailhead parking area to the Loft you will gain approximately 3880 feet in 4.6 miles one way.

Difficulty: A trail hike to Chasm Meadows followed by a scramble up towards the Loft, with a technical ice climb beyond. The climb consists of about 100 feet of WI3 to 3+.

In winter the Loft becomes susceptible to avalanches, both above and below the ice pitch, so exercise good judgment. It's best to do this climb before the heavy snows arrive.

Gear: A rope, crampons and 2 ice tools, plus a rack of ice screws. In early season conditions you may need primarily shorter (13 centimeter ice screws). If you plan to rappel the route, depending on where you set up your anchor you may need two 60 meter ropes.

USGS Quad: Longs Peak, CO.

away, so a route that was climbable a few days earlier may be gone by the time reports filter down the grapevine.

We had heard reports recently that some of these climbs were in shape, so we headed up to check things out. On arriving at the Longs-Meeker cirque we decided that the smears were sufficiently tenuous that discretion was the better part of valor, so turned our attention to one of the more reliable pitches of ice that forms below the Longs-Meeker saddle, a feature known as the Loft. Heading up the low-angled rock slabs and talus to the base of the ice we found excellent conditions on the headwall. The 100 feet of ice was the perfect spot to hone our ice-leading skills for the upcoming season. This early in the season the ice was no more than a few inches thick, requiring short (13 centimeter) ice screws for protection and some routefinding. Later the ice tends to fill in, making the climbing and protection a little easier.

Although it may seem like a long hike for just one pitch of moderate ice, a day spent climbing here is still a wonderful experience. The alpine environment is stunning. I have a difficult time thinking of a more scenic spot for that early season ice fix.

Approach

From the Longs Peak Trailhead, follow the Longs Peak Trail for 3.1 miles to the saddle on Mills Moraine where the Chasm Lake Trail divides from the Longs Peak Trail.

Continue on the trail towards Chasm Lake. Upon reaching the Ranger Hut below Chasm Lake, head left towards the large cirque between Mt. Meeker and Longs Peak. Depending on how deep the snow cover is, you may find a climbers' trail that switchbacks up the rock slabs and talus slopes below the Loft. By the way, the Park Service is currently constructing a new Ranger hut, slightly east of the temporary structure.



Heading up easy snow to the ice climb-small.jpg



Find a good spot to gear up and head up snow with occasional short ice/rock steps to the base of the obvious pitch of ice.

The climb consists of approximately 100 feet of WI3 to 3+ ice-small.jpg

The Climb

Climb approximately 100 vertical feet of moderate ice (WI3-3+). After the first 70 feet the climb eases.

The Descent

Either rappel the route or use the prominent ramp located at climber's left of the ice to walk back to the base of the climb.



