

“Trail Mix” – Ice Climbing by Dave Cooper

Mt. Lincoln Falls (WI3 – 5)



Mount Lincoln in Winter. The Ice Falls are directly above Montgomery Reservoir and below the impressive Lincoln Amphitheatre, both seen here

Located high on the flanks of one of Colorado’s famous “Fourteeners”, the Lincoln Icefall is one of the first ice-climbing locations in the State to form, usually by the end of October, and can have climbable ice well into May. If you enjoy an alpine feel to your climbing, this is the place for you. At 11,600 feet the weather can be mild, yielding plastic, “hero” ice; or it can be downright brutal, with high winds and frigid temperatures creating brittle, “dinner plate” ice.

Getting to the Trailhead: One mile south of Hoosier Pass on SH9, take the sharp exit west onto Park County Road 4. Follow CR4 downhill, staying straight on CR4 after 0.8 miles where Nuthatch Drive makes a sharp turn to the left. 0.2 miles after this junction there is another junction. CR4 turns sharply left, the middle fork continues slightly downhill to the Montgomery Reservoir Dam. Take the right fork (FSR408), which passes through an open gate and contours above the reservoir to a parking area by the spillway, a total of 1.6 miles from SH9. The road is usually kept open to the spillway all winter, but expect snowy and sometimes icy road conditions. Four-wheel or all-wheel drive vehicles are recommended.

Gear and Guidebooks: A standard ice rack is usually sufficient, except for early season where a few rock pieces may help. Most, if not all routes mentioned can be top roped, usually from fixed anchors. Please be considerate of other climbers and don’t hog routes! Double ropes are needed to rappel the main gully. For more information, see “Colorado Ice” by Jack Roberts.



A windy day on Lincoln

Include the usual climbing disclaimer , perhaps with the observation that ice climbing has additional hazards.

When friends and I started climbing here in the late '80's we usually had the place to ourselves. In the last few years, however, it has been discovered! On a recent weekend I counted 14 vehicles parked in the parking area by Montgomery Reservoir.

The Approach

From the parking area by the diversion tunnel spillway, walk along the road past the closed gate to the west corner of the reservoir, up the short hill to an open area on your left. Cross the Middle Fork of the South Platte River on a steel footbridge by a small concrete structure (the gauging station) and follow the trail up the hill, initially through trees, then turning left and continuing up the large talus field below the icefall. The ice is visible the whole way. The trail is usually well packed, which makes the approach much easier than it would otherwise be.

The Climbing



A busy day on the ice

The main gully is climbed in two 60 meter pitches or three shorter pitches. Fixed anchors may be found above the first pitch on the right side as well as on both sides of the large boulder at the top. Depending on the line chosen, the climbing is usually WI3 or WI4 on fat ice, though the middle easy pitch is often thin early in the season. Start from trees where the back-board is stored (a sobering reminder of the potential seriousness of ice climbing).

The Lower Wall doesn't form completely every year, but this season it's coming in nicely and offers mainly WI4 lines to supplement the easier right side. Find fixed anchors on top or continue to trees (60 meter rope).

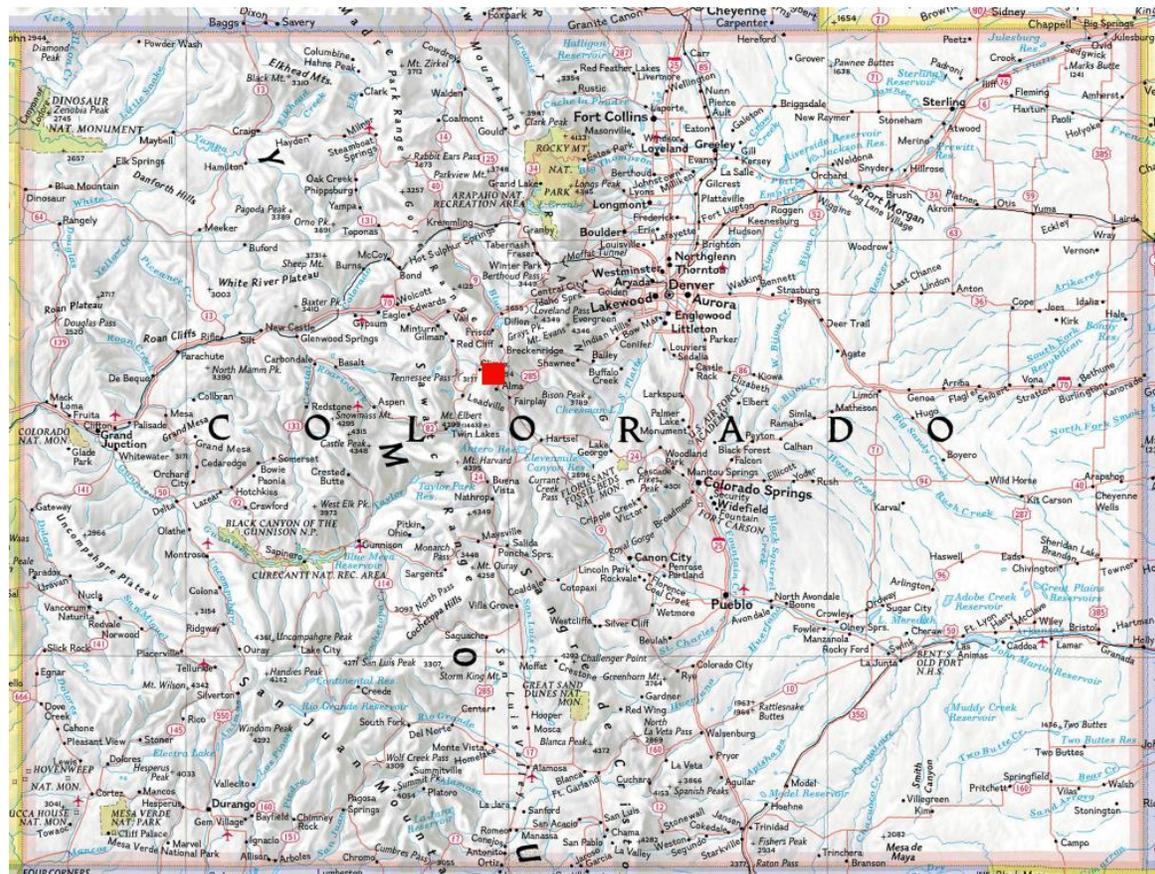
The upper right side of the icefall usually provides the steepest climbing with WI4 at the left end and WI5 or harder to the right. The WI5 pillars usually dry out and sublime away by mid-season. Two sets of fixed anchors can normally be found above this section.

Many other possible lines may be found, including climbs to the left of the main gully. One of my favorite winter or spring excursions is to climb the icefall, then continue on easy mixed ground to the righthand

ridge and on to the summit of Mt. Lincoln. Recently, however, access to Mt. Lincoln and several other “fourteeners” has been threatened, so all routes to the summit are currently off-limits. I sincerely hope that an equitable solution can be found which continues to provide access to Colorado’s special places. I strongly advise hikers and climbers to actively engage in this debate before it is too late.

To the right of the Grade 5 Pillars is a descent gully. Exercise care when avalanche conditions are significant, since this gully and the bowl above it can load. Also stay away from the slopes to climbers right of the icefall. Often, large debris indicates previous avalanche activity. I’ve only seen the main gully avalanche once, but there is always that potential!

Ice climbing isn’t for everyone, but if you enjoy this strange sport and have the skills to safely participate, you’ll enjoy the setting and climbing available at the Mount Lincoln Icefall.



Colorado Locator Map

