

South Mineral Creek Ice Climbs by Dave Cooper

Ice climbers face a constant quandary. They want snow to form the ice, as it melts and then re-freezes, but too much snow raises the avalanche danger. One of the areas of the State where this is particularly true is in the Silverton area, favored as it often is by large quantities of early-season snowfall. Not only can this snow elevate the avalanche threat but it also makes the approaches much longer. Call it the Goldilocks effect - we want just the right amount of snow, in just the right place, in the early season.

Doug at the start of the crux pitch on Snowblind-small.jpg

Every few years this perfect combination of conditions occurs. Early last winter was one of those years in the area near Silverton known as South Mineral Creek. When we spent a weekend there in November 2008, we not only had excellent ice conditions with little avalanche hazard, but also were able to drive the four-plus miles from the highway (US 550) to the base of the climbs. Normally this requires a ski or snowshoe approach. By camping at the South Mineral Campground we had the luxury of walking just a short distance each day to get to the base of our climb.

We found three stellar routes, all on the north face of Peak 12,579. These routes are: Snowblind (WI4, 335 meters, grade III) the Campground Couloir (WI4, 335 meters, grade IV) and the Direct North Face (WI4/5, 500 meters, grade IV). From right to left, Campground Couloir is the distinct ice line on the right side of the face behind the campground, Snowblind is a deeply inset slot to the left of Campground Couloir and the Direct North Face ascends a gully aimed at the summit of Peak 12, 579, to the right of Cataract Creek.

In the conditions we experienced, we felt that the most technical climbing was on Snowblind, possibly harder than its rating would suggest. The Direct North Face and Campground Couloir were perhaps at the easy end of their respective rating. That's the great



Getting to the Trailhead: From the town of Silverton, drive north on Highway 550 for 2 miles. If the road is open, turn west on the South Mineral Creek Road (County Road 7) and drive 4.5 miles to the campground. If the road is not drivable, ski or snowshoe to the climbs.

Gear: A standard ice rack is sufficient. Bring two 60 meter ropes to rappel the climbs. Either use existing anchors or use V-threads. Remember to check slings that other parties have left, and replace or supplement as necessary. Some of the rappel anchors consist of fixed pitons and other rock protection.

Difficulty: Offering long, multi-pitch ice climbing in the range WI4- to WI5. Note that this area is prone to high avalanche danger for much of the winter. Check on conditions before attempting these routes.

Guidebook: Colorado Ice - Volume 1 by Jack Roberts, Polar Star Publishing.

USGS Map: Ophir, CO.

thing about ice climbing. A route can be quite different each time you climb it.



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Snowblind-small.jpg

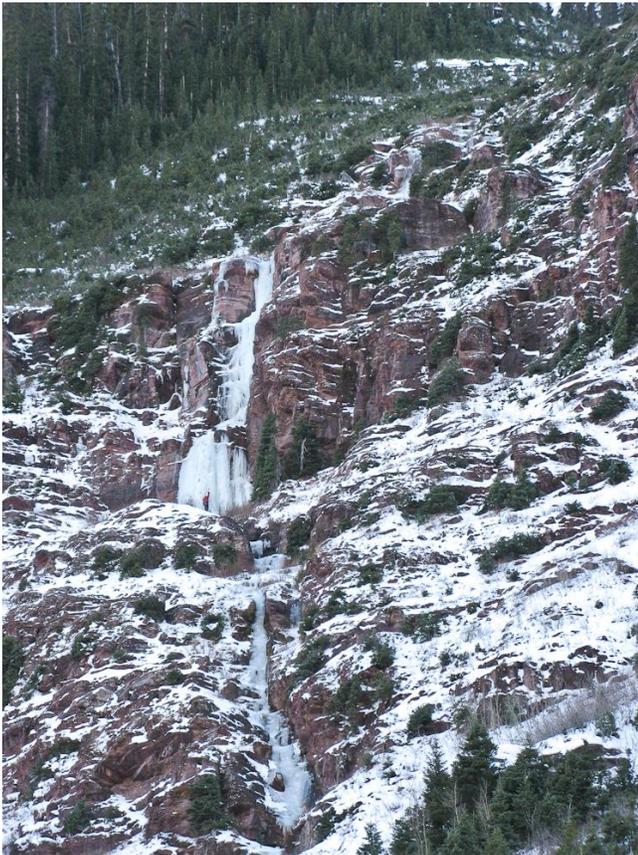
The Approaches

For each of these climbs the approach beta (information) is the same. Locate the climb, find a spot to cross South Mineral Creek (this can be tricky when not completely frozen), and head up to the base of the ice.

The Climbs

Snowblind (WI4, 335 meters, grade III)

The climbing consists of short, steep ice steps separated by lower angled ice and snow sections. We found the crux pitch of the route to be in typical early season condition, offering steep, chandeliered ice in a narrow constriction of the rock. The next step offered more of the same but was slightly easier. Continue up until the angle eases. At this point, most parties descend. Roberts suggests walking off to the left and making one short rappel. We chose to rappel the climb until we were able to walk off to the right on



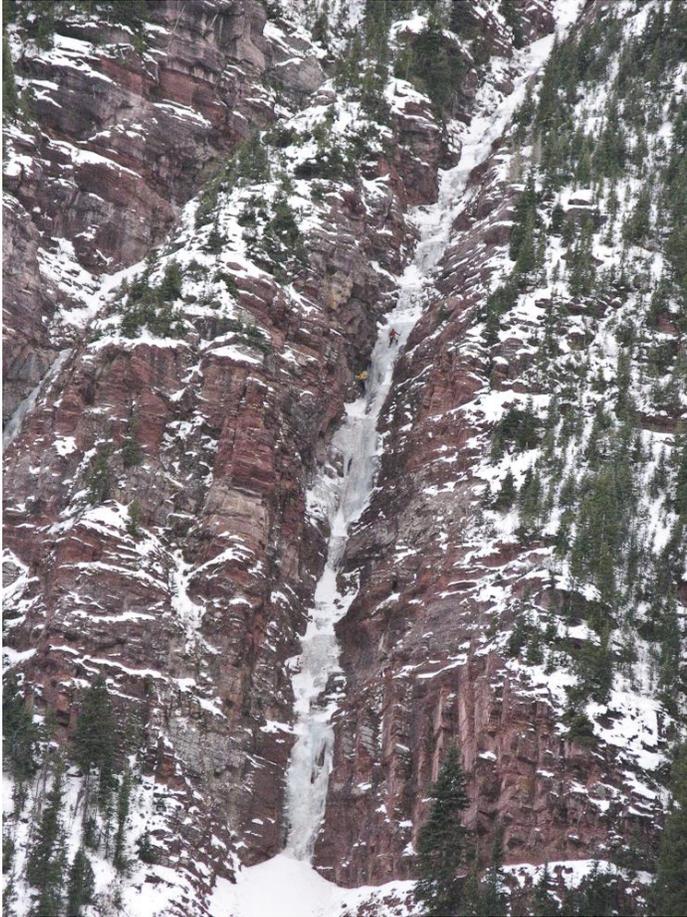
Climber at the start of the sustained climbing of Direct North Face-small.jpg

North Face Direct (WI4/5, 500 meters, grade IV)

An absolute gem, this route has a distinctly alpine feel to it. Long, rambling ice and snow ramps interspersed with short, steep ice pitches. You can go a long way up this climb, though the natural point to head down is when you reach the upper basin. From here it looks like a lot of walking for a small amount of easy ice climbing.

The first several hundred feet of the climb consist of easy ice and can be dispatched rapidly. A distinct triple-tiered section of steep ice above this might slow you down. We were able to link all three steps together into a 60 meter pitch. More ice steps separated by sections of walking are encountered above.

Roberts again suggests descending by walking off left and making “occasional” short rappels. We found the descent to be somewhat tedious, so eventually headed back towards the climb and made a couple of longer rappels before exiting on one of the broad ledges to the left and completing the descent on easier ground.



Campground Couloir (WI4, 335 meters, grade IV)

This is the easiest of the three routes described, and a good warm-up route. Three pitches of WI3-4 ice bring you to the top of the harder climbing. To descend, rappel the route.

Remember, climbing is an inherently dangerous activity and you should always climb within your ability after carefully judging the safety of the route.

Note that this area is prone to high avalanche danger for much of the winter. Check on conditions before attempting these routes.

We write about it, you take all the risks.

Kevin and Doug on Campground Couloir-small-2.jpg

TOPO! map printed on 10/13/09 from "Untitled3.tpo"

