



## AAC Publications

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### **Cathedral Ledge, Mordor Wall, Winter Ascent**

New Hampshire, White Mountains

The thin streak of ice seemed to defy gravity as it clung to the gently overhanging, blank granite. As I tiptoed onto the ice sheet, I noticed how my rope arced through space to Justin at the hanging belay. With a bolt still above my waist, I bounced my body to prove the ice was adhered to the cliff face. Now lacking any excuse, it was time to launch into 90 feet of the steepest ice I'd ever tried to climb.

Established by Steve Arsenault, Scott Brim, and Joe Cote over the course of several summers in the 1960s and early '70s, Cathedral Ledge's Mordor Wall (originally 5.9 A4) had a fearsome reputation for scary aid. The first winter ascent in 1979 required three days of effort by Bryan Becker and Alain Comeau. A second winter ascent of the route, 17 years later, still relied on extensive aid.

When a massive curtain of ice formed on the upper Mordor Wall in early 2019—bigger than anyone had ever seen before—Justin Guarino and I dreamed of doing the third winter ascent of this route as a wildly steep ice line. With a busy guiding schedule and an impending heat wave, I decided to fix the first A2 pitch solo by headlamp.

A few days later, Justin and I juggled the fixed line at first light. After bathooking about 75 percent of the way across the second-pitch traverse (marveling at the many "chicken bolts" that had sprouted since Arsenault's first ascent), I put on crampons and stepped down onto the ice, bounce-testing it with protection close by. I then cast off and committed to the thin smear, but after 45' of overhanging ice with no pro, I was starting to wonder if a fall from any higher would result in hitting the ground 125' below. Fighting back panic, I found an ancient bashie and clipped it to the rope, optimistically hoping the ice encrusting it would make it a viable piece of pro. My spirit was renewed when I found an old bolt in verglas, just below the small ice roof that would be the crux of the 200' pitch.

Higher, the equally long third pitch featured acrobatic M5 out the six-foot Mordor Roof to an upper ice curtain. We followed this straight up at WI5+, making a pleasant 195' final pitch. [Editor's Note: The third winter ascent of the Mordor Wall (3 pitches, 560') was graded WI6 M5 A2. Both of the previous winter ascents relied mostly on aid with short bits of ice climbing.]

– Nick Aiello-Popeo

## Images



The Mordor Wall at Cathedral Ledge, New Hampshire. An early cutting-edge aid wall, established in the late '60s and early '70s, the Mordor Wall had only been climbed twice before in the winter, both ascents relying primarily on aid. Unprecedented ice formation on the Mordor Wall in 2019 allowed Nick Aiello-Popeo and Justin Guarino to make the third winter ascent mainly as an ice climb (WI6 M5 A2).



New Hampshire's Cathedral Ledge, seen on the day of the Mordor Wall's third winter ascent. The route follows the wide hanging ice smear just right of center.



Nick Aiello-Popeo leading the second pitch—a bathook traverse leading to a WI6 ice smear—during the third winter ascent of the Mordor Wall (WI6 M5 A2) at Cathedral Ledge.



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Nick Aiello-Popeo leading the second pitch—a bathook traverse leading to a WI6 ice smear—during



the third winter ascent of the Mordor Wall (WI6 M5 A2) at Cathedral Ledge.



Nick Aiello-Popeo leading the third pitch of the Mordor Wall, just below the Mordor Roof, visible above. A fairly popular aid route in summer, the Mordor Wall featured once-in-a-lifetime ice formation in 2019, when Aiello-Popeo and Justin Guarino made the third winter ascent at WI6 M5 A2.

## Article Details

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