



AAC Publications

New Ice Couloir Climbs

California, Eastern Sierra

Over the course of 2019, solo and with several partners, I climbed three ice couloirs that were likely first ascents in the eastern Sierra.

The colorful and obscure Piute Crag, southeast of Mt. Emerson, are plainly visible along the Bishop skyline and beckon to the adventurous climber. These jumbled peaks have seen very little traffic, considering their easy access from the southern side, probably due to warnings about the loose nature of the rock. No ascents have been recorded from their northern sides, even though there are a handful of attractive short couloirs rising between the pointy summits.

In the dark hours of July 17, I set off up the bumpy 4WD road to Horse Creek Spring in the Bishop Bowl. A quick and uneventful approach up onto the glacial moraine led to 600' of 50° snow and alpine ice in the narrow couloir between Piute Crag 4 and 5. At the col I switched out my boots and crampons for approach shoes, which proved barely adequate for the nearly vertical 250' western headwall of Crag 5. Onsighting steep, technical terrain in tennies, ropeless, and with a pack to an unknown summit was one of the highlights of my Sierra summer. According to the vintage summit register, the last ascent of the peak was in 1974, and mine was maybe only the fourth ever: North Couloir and West Face (850', 5.7 AI2). I descended the original Clyde route and was back at my office job in town by lunchtime.

South of the Piute Crag, Mt. Tom Ross (13,247') is a neat little peak tucked away from most vantage points, with an impressive northeast face hidden at the head of a small cirque above Schober Lakes. There are no technical routes recorded on this peak—no surprise given that it sits in the shadows of the bigger and more attractive Mendel and Darwin. On September 6, sporting neckties in an effort to keep mountaineering classy, Tad McCrea and I approached the northeast face from Lamarck Col, crossing over the Sierra Crest twice to drop into the base below the wall. A long, narrowing couloir rises up the left side of the face, eventually dying out just before it intersects the peak's east ridge. After 800' of 50° snow with some narrow water-ice steps and a couple 5th-class chockstones, we reached a beautifully featured dihedral ramp that diagonaled back right across the steep face for another 400' of exposed 4th and easy 5th-class climbing to the summit. We climbed the route, Dress for Less (1,200', III 5.4 AI2), car-to-car in a long day from North Lake.

A minor bump along the long northwest ridge of Mt. Humphreys (13,986'), Peak 13,440'+ is the northernmost subpeak along the half-mile ridge. There are four couloirs to the right of the classic one on Mt. Humphreys, with the third from the left striking a deep gash into a broad rock buttress. All of them have been skied in fat winter conditions, but there is no record of any ascents as fall ice climbs. Natalie Brechtel, Earl McAlister, and I climbed the line in heroic conditions on October 12, with mostly Styrofoam névé and some wide swaths of exposed water ice. Much of the route was in the 50–70° range, with a few steeper bits through narrower constrictions. The rope and rack stayed in the backpack for the secure but seriously calf-burning ascent. A short 4th-class rock step put us on the unnamed subpeak. From here, a highly motivated party could follow the northwest ridge all the way to the summit of Humphreys, but when faced with an obvious and easy walkoff down the sandy north slopes and the prospect of happy-hour drinks in town, we chose the latter. Névé Névé Land (1,400', AI3) is one of the steeper and more sustained couloirs in the Sierra and a worthy objective, with or without a major summit.

– Richard Shore

Images



Earl McAllister climbing over the bergschrund during the likely first ascent of Névé Névé Land (1,400', AI3), a prominent couloir that leads to the northwest ridge of Mt. Humphreys.



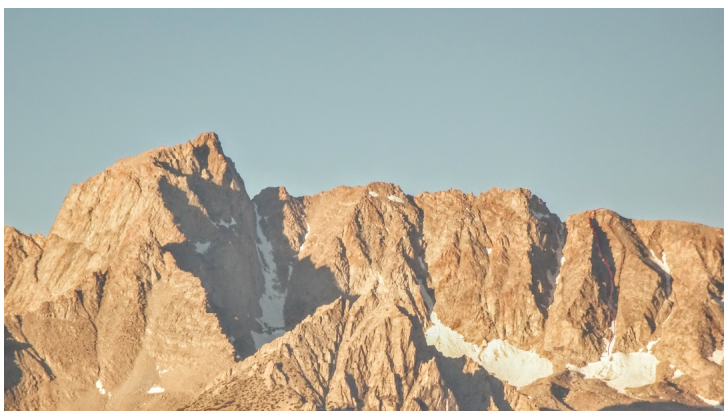
Looking down the headwall of Piute Crag 5 during the first ascent of the North Couloir and West Face (850', 5.7 AI2). Richard Shore soloed this new route in mid-July 2019.



The northeast face of Mt. Tom Ross (13,247'), south of Lamarck Col, showing the line of Dress for Less (1,200', III 5.4 AI2), climbed by Tad McCrea and Richard Shore in summer 2019.



Natalie Brechtel enjoys Styrofoam névé during the first ascent of Névé Névé Land (1,400', AI3), a prominent couloir that leads to the northwest ridge of Mt. Humphreys.



Mt. Humphreys (13,986') from the east, showing the line of Névé Névé Land (1,400', AI3). This prominent couloir leads to the summit of Peak 13,440'+, the northernmost subpeak along Humphreys' northwest ridge.



Natalie Brechtel enjoys a rare swatch of High Sierra water ice during the first ascent of Névé Névé Land (1,400', AI3), a prominent couloir that leads to the northwest ridge of Mt. Humphreys.



Piute Crag 5 on the left and Piute Crag 4 on the right. Richard Shore climbed the obvious central couloir to gain the notch, where he headed left to climb the west face of Crag 5 to the summit.



Tad McCrea climbing moderate névé during the first ascent of Dress for Less (1,200', III 5.4 AI2) on the northeast face of Mt. Tom Ross (13,247') in the eastern Sierra.



Tad McCrea nearing the summit of Mt. Tom Ross (13,247') during the first ascent of Dress for Less (1,200', III 5.4 AI2) on the northeast face. The Schober Lakes are below.

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