



## AAC Publications

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### **Royce Falls, First Known Ascent**

California, Eastern Sierra

**Royce Falls is notable for being perhaps the highest of the large waterfalls in the Sierra.** This obscure horsetail fall descends approximately 700' over its 1,200' length, fed by the drainage of Royce Lakes atop the 11,000' Merriam plateau. The unique combination of a sun-exposed lake plateau at high elevation provides a ready supply of water to be fed and frozen into a pure water ice climb. As such, it only forms in the very depths of winter.

Wind-deposited snow collects in the large approach basin, and in the relatively dry January of 2021, I observed knee- to waist-deep powder for nearly four miles of the nine-mile, 4,000' approach from Pine Creek Trailhead. The long approach, limited daylight, and the frigid temperatures required for the ice to form made this ascent a committing 14-hour day, car-to-car.

The climb itself is no harder than WI3 (though plenty of opportunities exist for harder variations), which is associated with the steepest, most magnificent section, where the falls turn from their protected position in a large dihedral and cascade down a series of steps to the valley floor. The upper dihedral is like a standard 30–50° Sierra goulotte, but filled primarily with ice steps and slabs rather than snow. With its moderate climbing, striking form, and spectacular position, Royce Falls has the potential to be a more widely sought objective in the High Sierra.

— Jonathan Lai

## Images



The lower, steepest section of Royce Falls, which cascades from a high alpine plateau near Merriam Peak to the valley floor of French Canyon. Jonathan Lai made the first recorded ascent of this backcountry waterfall, free solo, in January 2021.



A pulled-back view of Royce Falls showing the upper couloir and most of the lower falls. Jonathan Lai made the first recorded ascent of this backcountry waterfall, free solo, in January 2021.

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