



AAC Publications

Mt. Brown, Northwest Face: Left Gully, Summit Finish; Your Other Left

Montana, Lewis Range, Glacier National Park

The northwest face of Mt. Brown showing: (1) Your Other Left (IV WI4 4th class and steep snow, Bourret-Clark, 2020); (2) Left Gully (III, WI3/4, steep snow); (2a) Left Gully with finish to summit (IV WI3 M2 and steep snow, Clark, 2020); (3) Right Gully (III WI2-4); and (3a) Mile of Smiles (IV WI3+ 5.2 and steep snow, Reardon, 2003). Photo by Adam Clark

The northwest face of Mt. Brown (8,565') in the center of Montana's Glacier National Park has two prominent—and in some years even popular—ice climbs. Known as the Right and Left Gullies, they consist of thousands of feet of rolling WI2/3 with the occasional WI4 step. Both of these routes finish short of Brown's summit. Despite a quick approach, the short days of late autumn and early winter, combined with a lot of vertical gain, persuade most parties to forgo the top. In his guidebook *Big Sky Ice*, Ron Brunckhorst suggests members of Montana's legendary Dirty Sox Club might have done the first ascents of the Right and Left Gullies, but the dates or climbers remain a mystery.

In November 2003, after climbing the lower half of Right Gully, Blase Reardon—one of Glacier's alpine climbing pioneers—continued up 2,000' of unclimbed terrain, diagonalizing up and climber's left, before eventually joining the southwest ridge to reach the summit (see AAJ 2004). His route, Mile of Smiles (IV 5.2 WI3+), is an excellent climb and endurance challenge.

Inspired by this long-ago precedent, I decided to see if the Left Gully had more worthwhile terrain above the traditional turnaround spot, and to explore other options on Brown's northwest face.

Despite asking many longtime local climbers and digging for any written documentation, I have never found evidence that anyone has climbed above roughly 7,000' on Left Gully. At this elevation the ice ends and the route broadens from a gully into a rock-walled basin topped by a steep cliff band guarding the summit ridge.

On December 3, 2020, I left alone in the foggy darkness and made my way to the base of the Left Gully by headlamp. The climbing began at an elevation around 3,600'. Conditions were marginal, and I had to make some moves on wet rock and thin ice. Conditions improved above 5,000'. I enjoyed a 2,000' ribbon of grade 2 or 3 water ice interspersed with steep snowfields. By midday I had reached the cliff below the summit ridge. After some false starts and ledge traversing, I pulled a few steep M2 moves and continued on snow- and ice-plastered fourth-class rock to the ridge at 8,300'. Twenty minutes later, I was on the summit and basking in brilliant sunshine. I descended the shady northeast face to Avalanche Lake.

The Left Gully taken to the summit (5,000', IV WI3/4 M2) is a superb fall or early winter alpine climb of moderate technical difficulty but demanding length. Several more difficult variations are possible, with ice up to WI4 to 5+ and stout dry-tooling challenges.

Blase Reardon had told me years ago, "You know, there is a third gully on Brown's northwest face. It is located left of the Left Gully. If you climb it, you should name it Your Other Left!"

I finally set out to explore this mysterious third gully in December 2019 with Glacier ranger Ed Visnovske. We discovered another fun and engaging alpine route, with climbing similar in character to the other two gullies, but spindrift and dwindling daylight turned us around at 6,500'.

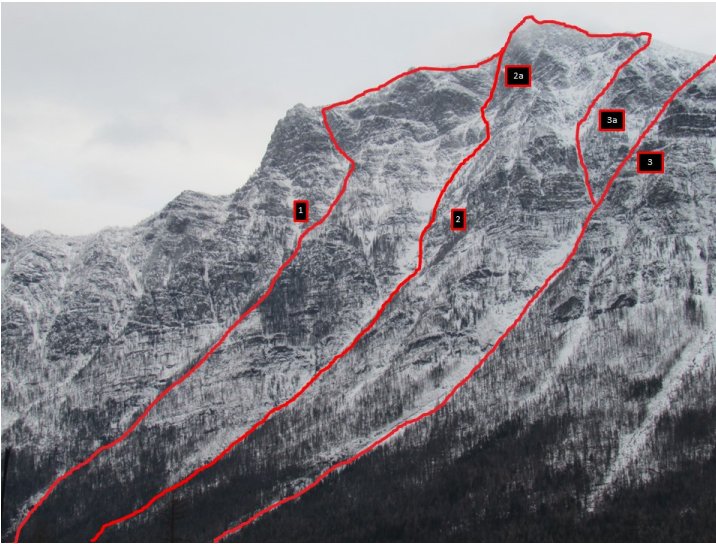
On December 6, 2020, three days after my ascent of the full Left Gully, the weather and avalanche conditions were still ideal for another big route, so I partnered with Sammy Bourret for a second attempt on the still-unclimbed left-most gully.

Temperatures had dropped since my climb of Left Gully, and the low-elevation ice had improved considerably. We began swinging tools at about 3,800' and moved quickly up several WI3 pitches and one short WI4 pitch. At 5,800' the gully narrowed to only a few feet wide and offered passage through a formidable cliff band. Sammy then led a short but steep WI4 pitch at 7,000'. The final 800' continued up a deep cleft with solid fourth-class rock. We scratched our way up to a final snowfield and then the summit ridge at 7,900'. Moving quickly up the north ridge, we reached the summit in the blue-gray twilight of an early winter evening. We descended the south face to Snyder Lake—definitely a faster descent than going down to Avalanche Lake.

Located north of Left Gully, Your Other Left (4,800', IV 4th class WI4) is another outstanding alpine climb covering thousands of feet of moderate terrain in a beautiful alpine setting.

— Adam Clark

Images



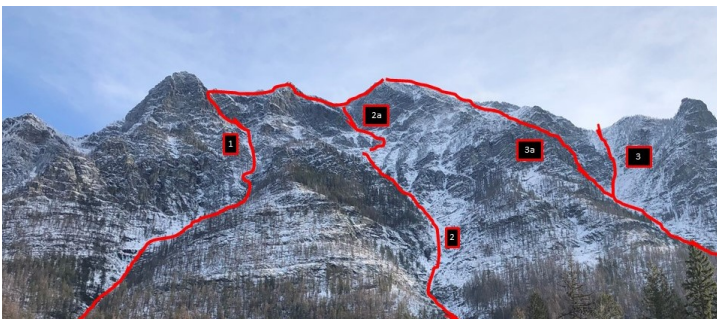
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The red line shows the approximate route taken through the uppermost cliff band above the Left Gully on the northwest face of Mt. Brown.



Sammy Bourret leads a short, steep ice pitch near the top of Your Other Left on the northwest face of Mt. Brown.



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