



AAC Publications

West St. Marys Peak, Snyelmn Pillar

United States, Montana, Mission Mountains

Snyelmn Pillar seen from the outlet of Sonielem Lake. Peak Y is in the background. Photo by Spencer Gray

In early September, Damian Mast and I hiked to a north-facing pillar above the south shore of Sonielem Lake in the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness. This pillar is an anomaly, pinched out of the northeast aspect of the northwest ridge of West St. Marys Peak (9,372'), like a crimp in a pie crust. The pillar appears to be made of thin beds of Precambrian limestone and siltite. It is generally steep, competent rock. The pillar varies from about ten to 80 feet wide, and the rock quality degrades quickly on either side. I'm not aware of other technical routes on this aspect of the northwest ridge.

After bivying above Vacation Pass to the south of Sonielem Lake, we scrambled to the base of the pillar at dawn. The first seven pitches, connecting ledge systems, were fairly moderate, with sustained difficulties from 5.7 to 5.10. Many small blocks and stacked flakes were piled on ledges and plastered on faces, so choosing protected belays was important. The underlying rock was sound, however.

Damian Mast finishing pitch seven on Snyelmn Pillar above Sonielem Lake. Photo by Spencer Gray

The pillar is split into three tiers, the divisions coming at the end of pitches two and six. The climbing consisted of incipient cracks on faces, frequent horizontal breaks for hands and feet, and wandering corners. The line climaxed with a full-value 5.11+ pitch that shifted from a run-out face with finicky gear to an overhung corner capped with deep, reachy jams in a roof and a foot-cutting sequence. We walked off at dark after scrambling south over the summit of West St. Marys.

This line deserves repeating. Beyond quality climbing and attractive stone, much of it covered in lichen the colors of wood ash and neon daffodils, the route offers a unique technical passage out of a beautiful amphitheater. We called the route Snyelmn Pillar (1,300', 9 pitches, 5.11+). "Snyelmn" (anglicized on the lake and other landmarks as "Sonielem") is the local Salish word for "the place where you surround something," referring both to a place and a way of hunting. A full alpine rack, including small wires and pins, is recommended.

— **Spencer Gray**

Images



The topo for Snyelmn Pillar (1,300', 9 pitches, 5.11+) on West St. Marys Peak, Mission Mountains, Montana.



A view of Snyelmn Pillar (1,300', 9 pitches, 5.11+) from the southeast. The three tiers are clearly visible.



Damian Mast on pitch three of Snyelmn Pillar ((1,300', 9 pitches, 5.11+), West St. Marys Peak, Mission Mountains, Montana.



Damian Mast on pitch five of Snyelmn Pillar (1,300', 9 pitches, 5.11+), West St. Marys Peak, Mission Mountains, Montana.



The crux 5.11+ pitch on the headwall of Snyelmn Pillar (1,300', 9 pitches, 5.11+), West St. Marys Peak, Mission Mountains, Montana.



Damian Mast finishing pitch seven on Snyelmn Pillar above Sonielem Lake.



Snyelmn Pillar seen from the outlet of Sonielem Lake. Peak Y is in the background.



Spencer Gray at the start of the Snyelmn Pillar's crux eighth pitch, which went free at 5.11+.

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