



AAC Publications

Mt. Niblock, Northeast Face, Just a Nibble

Canada, Alberta, Canadian Rockies

Among the skyline of giants around Lake Louise, Mt. Niblock (2,976m) had been hiding from me in plain sight all year, until finally I pulled my car over to take a closer look. Bands of black limestone shrouded the northern aspect of the mountain, revealing steep cliffs amid an otherwise white face.

On March 13, I soloed the north-northwest ridge and the upper north face in an 18-hour round trip. I brought along a half rope and some pins and wires for self-belaying. I climbed the final 200m or so using a self-belay loop to get through the cruxes of the climb.

About a month later, on April 16, I returned to Mt. Niblock with Dylan Cunningham to try the unclimbed northeast face. [A summer route up Niblock's northern face was climbed in July 1976 (Calvert-Calvert-Gardner-Shank), with moderate snow and short rock and ice bands (AD-). The 2021 route climbs a steeper aspect left of a prominent buttress.] We left the Lake Louise parking lot on skis, traversed under Mt. St. Piran (2,649m), and zigzagged up through the forest to the basin below the face, where we camped. Photos from my previous mission showed minimal overhead hazard compared with the other mountains in the area, where spring cornices hung heavy.

We began climbing by headlamp at 2 a.m. Dylan led us through a series of thin ice steps and deep facets. Navigating the fickle ice atop loose rock consumed more time than we had anticipated, and dawn had arrived by the time I took over the lead. The ice transitioned into tiers of WI4 and eventually into a 45–50° snow slope. About 150m of snow led to the base of the rock bands, where the face became vertical.

I slipped into my rock shoes, clipping my boots and crampons to my harness, and started up. The dark rock was fragile and splintered, making for very delicate, insecure climbing. After a few meters, I managed a beak placement and lowered back to the belay in search of a safer passage. I switched back into boots and crampons and began to traverse left. Soon I came upon a shallow chimney, which invited me up with one more transition into rock shoes. Dylan then led through the trickiest mixed section of the route: a bouldery overhang on insecure pick placements. I moved dynamically, cutting my feet as I seconded the pitch. We graded it M6.

Next came a compact low-angle slab dusted with snow, which I climbed in rock shoes; however, the snow I brushed off the rock melted underfoot and refroze into verglas. This was a unique experience—the climbing was no harder than 5.6, but the foot placements were coated in ice, making downclimbing impossible. I was quite afraid: unable to find a single placement of gear, knowing that the anchor below was an array of questionable pins. I angled toward the eastern skyline, where I landed a lucky strike and slung a frozen chockstone as my first piece of protection. Luck is a generous gift one cannot count on receiving, yet we rely on it every time we start up a big mountain.

The sun hung low on the horizon as we intercepted the east ridge. Complex terrain still loomed above to reach the summit, a couple of hundred meters up, and the descent down the ridge looked to be equally complex. We chose to start down while we had light.

We rappelled and downclimbed the ridge and traversed into a col, from which we opted to bum-slide the snow slope leading back toward camp on the north side. We cut away a small cornice to test the

stability, then launched into the slide. We made it back to our camp by twilight, packed up, and skied back to the Lake Louise parking lot by 10 p.m. The climb was Just a Nibble (500m, 5.10- WI5 M6 R).

– **Brette Harrington, USA and Canada**

Images



Lower slopes on the northeast face of Mt. Niblock.



The lower wall on the northeast face of Mt. Niblock. The climbers angled left up the face from the left of the two obvious lines of ice smears.



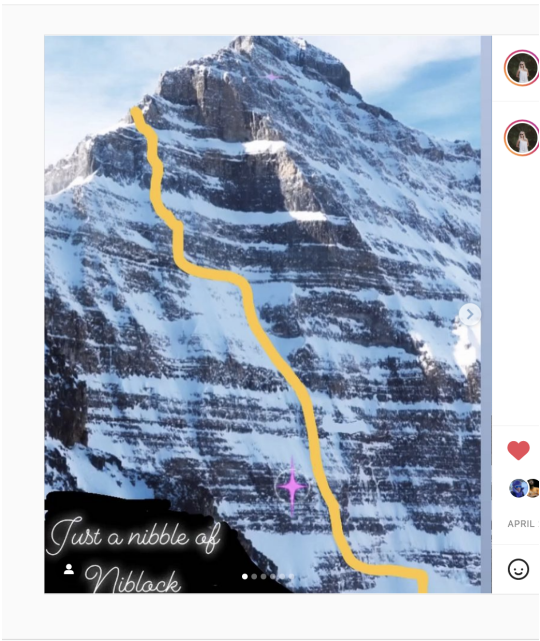
Brette Harrington leading thin ice on the northeast face of Mt. Niblock.



Dylan Cunningham bare-handing a mixed passage on the northeast face of Mt. Niblock.



Mt. Niblock (2,976m) from camp to the northeast, showing the 500-meter line of (1) Just a Nibble (April 2021) and (2) the 1976 summer route. Brette Harrington's March 2021 solo of the north-northwest ridge and upper north face traversed across the face (3) to finish on the 1976 route.



The northeast face of Mt. Niblock, showing the line of Just a Nibble.

Article Details

Author	Brette Harrington
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	172
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions