



Washington Pass, Silver Star Mountain, Northwest Face

Washington, North Cascades

The Silver Star Mountain massif and immediate area, just northeast of Washington Pass, contain relatively few documented snow and ice routes—like much of the Cascades, this area is normally buried under deep snow in winter. But as there is normal, there is also the abnormal. In 2019, a relatively wet autumn mixing with cold temperatures, just enough snowfall, the odd rain event, and cloud coverage equated to ice and hard snow on specific aspects.

On October 30, Steph Williams and I started up a new route on the northwest face of Silver Star Mountain's west summit (8,840'), a prominent subpeak. As we climbed squeaking snow toward the initial ice couloir, timing and conditions coalesced into real opportunity. Seventy meters of perfect ice, up to 85°, led to steep snow. A high-quality ice smear, protected by rock and ice gear, gave passage to a sheltered belay above.

Here, the couloir widens to a slab and a broad face extends above to the whimsical turrets that punctuate the ridge. A tilted corner abuts the black and gold slab, and it featured involved yet pleasant dry tooling past a small amount of plastered ice, leading to the junction of a hanging snow bowl and the rest of the northwest face. This rope length protected deceptively well and was very fine climbing in all manner of granite and ice.

During an exploratory effort the previous November, Scott Johnston and I had encountered similar conditions on the mountain but descended from a high point below this slab pitch. The notable difference in conditions then was the non-existent thin-ice smear before the slab; Scott and I had climbed a mixed corner immediately left of the ice we found during this year's ascent. In the rare instances that the route's initial ice is climbable but this ice smear is not, the mixed corner will be the safer option for that particular pitch.

Above, a right-trending snow ramp led to an offwidth crack, which deposited us 10m below the summit ridge. Moving several meters southward to a mixed passage, about 80m above the Whine Spire (see AAJ 2003), we gained the north ridge. Snow and rock along the ridge led to blocky low-fifth terrain and the west summit, as well as the twinkle of gratitude that emanates from an opportunity seized—the Northwest Face (IV WI4+ M6-).

– Seth Keena

Images



The Silver Star massif in typical spring conditions, showing the line of the Northwest Face (500m, IV WI4+ M6-), climbed by Seth Keena and Steph Williams in October 2019. The two approached via the Burgundy Col trail, traversing southwest to the base of the route. They returned to the highway by descending from the west summit, down the Silver Star Glacier, around the western half of the mountain, and over Burgundy Col (visible on the left).



The west face of the Silver Star massif, showing known routes. The Northwest Face (IV WI4+ M6-, 2019) is in green. The Central Couloir (Allen-Keller, 2006) is in red. The pink line is Gato Negro (IV 5.10+), a rock route climbed by Larry Goldie and Scott Johnston in 2001 (see AAJ 2003); this route tops out a formation they dubbed Whine Spire.



Steph Williams following the final mixed passage to the ridge during the first ascent of the Northwest Face (500m, IV WI4+ M6-) on Silver Star's west summit.



High-quality (and rare!) Washington Pass ice leads into the main couloir during the first ascent of the Northwest Face (500m, IV WI4+ M6-) on Silver Star's west summit.



Seth Keena on a thin ice smear leading to the base of the mixed slab on the Northwest Face (500m, IV WI4+ M6-) on West Silver Star. On a previous attempt this smear didn't exist, and the pitch was climbed via a rock corner on the left.



Seth Keena reaching the top of the tilted corner pitch, about halfway up the northwest face. From here, he and Steph Williams climbed the slab above for another 55m of climbing to reach a hanging bowl.



Seth Keena climbing the final meters of the northwest face to the summit ridge on beautiful stone.



Seth Keena on the west summit of Silver Star after making the first ascent of the Northwest Face (500m, IV W14+ M6-), with the North Cascades spread out behind.



Seth Keena descending from Burgundy Col in the last light of the day.

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