



## AAC Publications

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### **Wheeler Crest, New Ice and Mixed Routes**

United States, California, Eastern Sierra

**In early 2022, a flurry of long new ice and mixed routes were climbed on the Wheeler Crest.** An unusually heavy and wet December snowpack, followed by a long warm and dry spell, had transformed this rugged desert mountainside into a winter climber's wonderland.

Jack Cramer, Tad McCrea, and Ian McEleney got things started on January 22 with a variation and extension to Scottish Astronauts (700', III 5.8 WI3 M3, Kauffman-Shore, 2019) on the Rocketship in Fifth Canyon. The trio encountered more challenging mixed climbing on the first pitch than was found during the first ascent, but on the third pitch, previously climbed by a wide rock crack, a hanging ice strip had formed into climbable shape. At the risk of a nasty pendulum fall back into the dihedral, Jack opted for a short tension traverse to gain this thin strip of ice. While following, Ian thought the traversing moves were tricky M6.

The guys raced up easy climbing to a notch behind the summit, where Tad had eyed some more blue ice. A long pitch of WI3 out of the notch led to a final WI4 pillar that dead-ended high on the wall. Ian led this last pitch in the dark with the team's only headlamp. They rappelled the route from V-threads and fixed anchors, and called the extended line (with the variation) Polish Cosmonauts (1,000', WI4 M4 A1).

On January 25, Jack, Tad, and I slogged up Dike Canyon to a potential ice line on the Black Obelisk, soloing a nice pitch of sticky WI2 on the way to the base. Just right of the East Are te rock route (5.10, Sinner-Shore, 2018), we connected a series of snowfields, ice dribbles, and mixed-climbing ramps for two pitches (WI2 M3) to reach a big ledge below the main objective: a 60m stretch of thin and beautiful WI4-. Jack led a horizontal traverse through an M4 overhang to gain this ice, which was followed by another fabulous 60m WI3 runnel that Tad led. An easy mixed pitch and snowy third-class scrambling led to the summit. We raced impending darkness as we downclimbed and rappelled the route with double ropes. Our route name, My Cup Runneth Over (1,000', WI4- M4), references lyrics from the late, great Jamaican reggae artist Dennis Brown's "Here I Come."

On February 3, Jack and I were back again, this time headed up Wells Canyon to have a crack at a hidden ice line on the north flanks of Wells Peak.

Starting just left of the classic North Ridge (IV 5.10, Fischer-Jensen, 1972), we climbed two long pitches of blue ice (WI3) to gain a right-angling snow couloir, which we followed for several hundred feet into a bowl below the amphitheater-like headwall. Another nice pitch of thin WI2 ice led us to a belay ledge, where two golden eagles swooped in for a flyby. Jack then styled the crux pitch, following an icy apron and short pillar before questing onto a vertical M5 dry-tooling section. More thin ice brought us to the massive ledge system that separates the lower and upper east face. We rappelled from there with double ropes. The Promised Land (1,000', WI3+ M5) was repeated shortly after by friends who said it was one of the best winter routes they'd done in the Eastern Sierra.

Several shorter new routes were done during the same period: Tad and I climbed Todo Tranquilo (400', 5.5 WI3-) on the Tranquility Wall; I soloed the North Couloir (800', WI2+) of Overlooked Peak; and Ian, Jack, and McKenzie Long climbed Miles of Cobalt (700', WI3 M3) on the north side of Wells Peak, left of The Promised Land.

There's a rumor that ice may have been climbed on Wells Peak in the past, but it seems unlikely that most of the routes described here had been done before. Regardless, all the ice was falling apart by the second week of February. These routes had surely all formed up before, but these were the best conditions I'd seen in eight years of watching and waiting. It's hard to say whether they will come in more or less frequently due to climate change, but one thing is certain: Long, delicate ice routes in the desert are truly an ephemeral treat.

— **Richard Shore**

## Images



My Cup Runneth Over (1,000', WI4- M4) on the Black Obelisk, Wheeler Crest, California. Jack Cramer, Tad McCrea, and Richard Shore made the first ascent in January 2022, when the Wheeler Crest had the best ice climbing conditions Richard Shore had seen in "eight years of watching and waiting."



Tad McCrea (left) and Jack Cramer (right) soloing a pitch of WI2 on the approach to the Black Obelisk, ahead of their first ascent of My Cup Runneth Over (1,000', WI4- M4) in the Eastern Sierra.



Jack Cramer leading the crux third pitch on My Cup Runneth Over (1,000', WI4- M4) on the Black Obelisk, Wheeler Crest, Eastern Sierra.



Tad McCrea following the long and thin WI4- third pitch on My Cup Runneth Over (1,000', WI4- M4) on the Black Obelisk, Wheeler Crest, Eastern Sierra, California.



Jack Cramer following the long WI3 ice runnel of pitch four on My Cup Runneth Over (1,000', WI4- M4) on the Black Obelisk, Wheeler Crest, Eastern Sierra, California.



Richard Shore leading the WI3 second pitch of The Promised Land (1,000', WI3+ M5), Wells Peak, Wheeler Crest, Eastern Sierra, California.



Richard Shore leading up to the headwall on The Promised Land 1,000', WI3+ M5), Wells Peak, Wheeler Crest, Eastern Sierra, California.



Jack Cramer leading the crux pitch of The Promised Land (1,000', WI3+ M5) on Wells Peak in the Wheeler Crest.



Jack Cramer leading the first pitch of The Promised Land (1,000', WI3+ M5) on Wells Peak in the Wheeler Crest.



Jack Cramer pulling onto the WI4 strip of hanging ice on Polish Cosmonauts (1,000', WI4 M4 A1), a variation plus extension to Scottish Astronauts (700', III 5.8 WI3 M3, Kauffman-Shore, 2019) on the Rocketship in Fifth Canyon of the Wheeler Crest.



On the left, Miles of Cobalt (700', WI3 M3), and on the right, The Promised Land (1,000', WI3+ M5), on the north side of Wells Peak.



The North Couloir (800', WI2+) on Overlooked Peak. Richard Shore made the first ascent, solo.



## Article Details

Author	Richard Shore
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	97
Page	148
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions