



AAC Publications

Sloan Peak, West Face, Merrill-Minton

Washington, North Cascades

On Sunday, January 29, 2023, Aaron Minton and I climbed a new ice route on the west face of Sloan Peak (7,835'). The climbing involved seven new pitches with difficulties up to WI4+, and we continued up the upper portion of Superalpine, a WI3/4 on the west face established by Porter McMichael and Kyle McCrohen in 2020. [Superalpine was first climbed all the way to the summit by Fabien Legallo and Nick Roy in 2022, likely the first winter-conditions ascent of the west face of Sloan Peak. Several routes have been climbed in summer.]

I had identified our line in photos and a scouting trip with Jeff McGowen earlier in the week. It looked like several intermittent ice flows to the left of Superalpine could be connected by traversing snowy ledges. I convinced Aaron to come check it out.

We drove our cars up to about 2,400' before getting stopped by snow and camped there. We woke up at 2:30 a.m. Conditions were prime for booting, so we left our skis at the cars and followed the trail that Jeff and I had put in. The approach followed the Bedal Creek drainage up to an elevation of about 5,200', from where we traversed about 150m to the mouth of a gully, which we climbed for an additional 100m to reach the base of the climb.

We arrived at the start of the route at around 7:20 a.m. It was quite cold as we racked up. The first section involved a snow gully with some low-angle ice. Aaron dragged the ropes up this easy terrain to the bottom of the first steep pitch at the base of an amphitheater. There was a selection of ice flows to choose from, but the best option looked to be one that led directly into another steep ice pitch. Aaron led the first pitch at WI3 on hollow, aerated ice. A great way to wake up the nerves in the morning! When the ice ended, he crossed a snow slope and built a rock belay, having run out the rope 60m. I took over and traversed 15m right to the base of the second steep ice pitch, and climbed another porous WI3 pillar.

Next, Aaron ran the ropes up a short ice step and across some snow to belay beneath a beautiful and intimidating hanging dagger. It felt above our pay grade at the time, so we evaluated the other options. Another nice flow about 50m to our right looked to be about WI5-ish. Though tempting, we passed on this too. We finally decided to take a WI3 ramp even further right. (The steeper pitches appeared formidable, although a stronger party might be able to get the job done.) We romped up as quickly as we could to get away from the overhead hazard and then traversed right on a big snowy ledge that brought us to the bottom of the money pitch.

As I led up this 30m flow, I found solid WI4 ice and an engaging WI4+ bulge toward the top. From the top of this pitch, we joined up with the Superalpine route.

We found excellent snow conditions on the upper half of the route. The wind had blown off any new accumulation, and the freeze-thaw had produced firm snow conditions perfect for fast climbing. At our high point 70m below the summit, we contemplated taking it to the top, but ultimately decided that it would be wise to turn around, with the sunset approaching and the fact that we didn't know the terrain on the descent.

We rappelled the Superalpine via seven or eight V-threads and a piton anchor that we built when we

couldn't find any ice. Spindrift chased us the entire way down. We reached the bottom of the face tired, cold, and wet. By the time we returned to our cars at 1:15 a.m., we had been on the move for 22 hours.

The Merrill-Minton (1,600', 10 pitches, IV WI4+') adds seven new pitches of climbing before joining up with the Superalpine. An integral ascent to the summit via this new variation awaits.

— **Tucker Merrill**

Images



Aaron Minton leading the way up the entry snow gully that provides access to the ice on the west face of Sloan Peak.



Aaron Minton romping up easy ice and past an unclimbed hanging dagger on the west face of Sloan Peak.



Tucker Merrill downclimbing the upper snow slopes on the west face of Sloan Peak to reach the first rappel for the descent of the Superalpine route. Merrill and Aaron Minton turned around about 70 meters below the summit as darkness approached. The tracks above are from a climber who had soloed the Corkscrew route.



The Merrill-Minton is the line on the left on the west face of Sloan Peak in the North Cascades. The route joins with Superalpine (McCrohen-McMichal, 2020; finished to the summit by Legallo-Roy in 2022) after seven new pitches. On the first ascent of the Merrill-Minton, the climbers stopped about 70 meters below the summit because of approaching darkness.



Tucker Merrill working his way up the crux pitch on the west face of Sloan Peak, 30m WI4+.

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