Evan Picard

WINTER HIGH

—ice climbing in New York

By Robert Mecus

Ice climbing on Poke-o-Moonshine Mountain

We pull up to Chapel Pond in the heart of the Adirondack High Peaks, and it's cold—really cold! The wind buffets the car gently; enough to make us not want to open the door. My long-time climbing partner Bob Elsinger and I are spending the day climbing three of the Adirondacks' classic ice climbs, and this is the last in our trifecta. Earlier we climbed Multiplication Gully in Wilmington Notch, and Roaring Brook Falls, between Chapel Pond and St. Huberts. The climbs were spectacular, and we've been enjoying the hauntingly beautiful Adirondack winter day.

Donning climbing rope, ice axes, crampons, helmet, and an assortment of nylon slings, carabiners and ice screws, we leave the car. Looking across the lake from the parking lot, the gully can clearly be seen as a wide channel of ice four hundred feet high. The wind rips across the surface of the frozen lake, creating unique designs of carved and swirled snow. Our crampons squeak on the snow with a comforting sound—squeaky snow means cold and dry conditions, perfect for doing physical activity in the winter.

Jung Taek Yoon

Tools of the trade include ice screws and carabiners.

At the base of the gully, we flake out (uncoil into a pile) the rope and I tie into one end. Looking over the equipment, I reflect on how much some of the technology and the sport itself have evolved over the years. Our ice axes, for example, are short and have radically drooped picks—different from the standard straight pick previously used. The new design was introduced here after legendary climber Yvon Chouinard visited the Adirondacks in 1969. Chouinard and friends brought new equipment and techniques that enabled climbers to ascend what was formerly seen as impossible sheets of ice. This changed the face of American ice climbing. Suddenly climbs like this last route we planned for today (appropriately called Chouinard's Gully) were possible.

Once we are ready, Bob belays me (a safety technique whereby your climbing partner lets out rope while you ascend, keeping ready to hold the rope tight if you fall), and I start up the first pitch. Swinging my tools into the ice and standing on the front points of my crampons, I gain height and place an ice screw into the ice. These tubular aluminum screws provide good protection in the solid ice, and I clip my rope to it. Well designed tubular ice screws have made the sport relatively safe, provided one has the knowledge and experience to judge the quality of the ice.

I climb until the rope comes tight to Bob, and then I build an anchor to belay him up to me. Standing on a small rock ledge, pulling in the rope with the warm late afternoon light shining on me, I look across the valley to Giant Mountain. It's beautiful and despite the cold, it's actually quite pleasant. I'm sheltered from the wind, and the body heat I generated from climbing is trapped in my puffy belay jacket, keeping me comfortable.

Salmon River Falls

LEAVE NO TRACE: Consideration for the natural environment is important, and that is where ice climbing really shines. A deep snow pack and climbing on a frozen medium that will disappear in a few months means there will be almost no trace of your passage if you take a little care. Walking off the top of a route is always preferred if possible. If you need to rappel, learn how to do it safely and with minimal impact. Inquire with the local DEC office about the use of fixed (permanent) anchors on the property before you go. Do not cut away vegetation to "improve" a climb. Consider the vegetation as part of the challenge of the climb, and work your way through the problem.

Jim Lawyer

Climbers joke amongst themselves that to be an ice climber you must enjoy some misery and suffering.

Bob meets and surpasses me, taking the gear from me as he continues to go up. Now, I am belaying him from below as he brings the rope up with him. In this way, a two-person climbing team can each share the thrill of "leading" a pitch. The leader is responsible for choosing the route up the ice, and placing the protection that will keep them and their partner safe. It's a thrilling feeling, looking below and seeing the rope sweeping down in graceful arcs, connected to your partner a hundred feet below. At the same time, you are very aware of the risks associated with the sport. If you fall at any time, but especially while leading, the danger is real.

Bob reaches the top, builds an anchor, and puts me on belay. As I climb up, more and more of the frosty Adirondack valley comes into view. My body again heats up from the exertion, but I have layered accordingly, which allows me to remove my belay jacket before I start climbing and put it in a small stuff sack on my harness. Climbing ice involves long periods of stationary activity, followed by periods of intense physical activity, so you need to layer properly.

Our climbs today, like just about all ice climbs in New York State, are located on DEC-managed lands. Areas in the Adirondacks, Catskills, Salmon River Unique Area, and a few other smaller

Mike Stanislaw

Underwood Canyon, Adirondacks

Greg Derda

A mixed climb in the Catskills.

areas as well, provide some of the best ice climbing around. In fact, climbers from all over the east coast come to test themselves against the ice here. Most ice climbers were skilled rock climbers before entering the realm of winter climbing. As you can imagine, everything is a little harder to do when it is five degrees Fahrenheit. Tying knots, wading through deep snow, keeping food, water, and digits warm; these are all things that add to the already exhilarating challenge of being high up on a cliff.

The Adirondacks offer the largest collection of ice climbing routes in the state. Here, you can experience everything from short and easy roadside climbs, to overnight excursions that are high on a remote wilderness cliff where you are completely reliant on your skill and experience to keep you safe. The Catskills Mountains, a mere ninety-minute drive from New York City, are also festooned with white lines in the winter. While these ice climbs tend to be shorter than, and not as remote as, some of the Adirondack climbs, what they lack in height they make up for in sheer verticality. In addition, the Catskills have a lot of mixed climbing opportunity—a difficult combination of ice and rock climbing that tests a climber's skills in multiple disciplines.

The Salmon River Falls Unique Area in Oswego County is a relatively new spot that ice climbers have discovered. Here, the Salmon River plunges over a shale band and has formed a wide overhanging cirque of rock. In winter, the wet and mossy areas of seeping rock crystallize into a fantastic pantheon of ice daggers and pillars, providing incredible opportunities for the ice climber who is ready to take on its challenges.

For me, ice climbing is a great way to experience the amazing beauty of New York's winter wonderland. Getting off the beaten trail, truly immersing myself in this format that nature offers, and seeing the environment from a vertical perspective is deeply rewarding. As Bob and I prepare to walk off the top of the climb (we walk—or hike—down, rather than rappel because it is safer, and often more efficient), we take one more look at the spectacular vista before us.

Mike Stanislaw

Climbing Roaring Brook Falls (south of St. Huberts), one of the best moderate ice climbs in the Adirondacks.

Twenty minutes later we are back in the car, changing into clothes for the drive home. I have to admit that I'm looking forward to sitting by the fireplace, wiggling my toes and fingers against the radiant warmth. It's been an amazing day—we climbed over 1,200 feet of ice; not bad for a short February day.

Avid ice-climber **Robert Mecus** is a forest ranger in DEC's Region 3.

Lucho Romero

Chapel Pond in the Adirondacks

SAFETY FIRST!

Safety is paramount when going on an ice-climbing adventure. Being responsible for your actions and self-reliant is more important than getting to the top. Ice climbers must first and foremost be able to judge the safety of the ice prior to climbing. Unlike rock, the ice changes texture and quality constantly. What was safe to climb last weekend may be unstable this weekend, and it takes an experienced eye to judge the soundness of an ice screw placement.

During the past ten years or so, ice climbing has undergone somewhat of a second revolution. A new wave of climbing tools has now enabled relative beginners to climb what was recently considered extremely difficult ice. Basic safety equipment includes a helmet, climbing boots, crampons, two ice axes, rope, climbing harness, an assortment of carabiners, ice screws and nylon slings. Depending on the weather and length of the climb, you should also carry water, head lamp, sunglasses, sun screen and high energy food.

Staying warm and avoiding hypothermia is vital to keeping safe. Climbers must be intimately familiar with their layering systems and be able to adapt to changing conditions quickly, while tied into an anchor on a small ledge. Recent improvements in textiles allow climbers to stay warm and dry even in the dampest conditions. A little knowledge changes what would be a cold, shivering experience into one in which you can enjoy the beauty of the winter landscape in a unique way.

The internet provides climbers with a lot of information, allowing them to gain knowledge far faster than their predecessors. But there are many things you simply can't learn online or from a book. It's especially important that beginning ice climbers "cut their teeth," either by hiring a guide to teach them the basics, or by performing an apprenticeship of sorts with an experienced climber. Remember, it takes an experienced eye to know when the ice is safe to climb!

There are many well-trained and experienced climbing guides in New York who can teach you the fundamental techniques of ice climbing and how to climb safely. For a list of these guide services, visit DEC's website and search for the licensed guide program.