

Mount Washington's five-star classic, *Pinnacle Gully* (NE1 3).
PHOTO BY DAVID LE PAGNE



COLD JUSTICE

American alpinism was born on Mount Washington in New Hampshire, yet even today the blustery peak offers a hazardous combination of challenging routes and deadly weather.

By Brian Irwin




LEFT: Negotiating the avalanche-prone Tuckerman Ravine. **ABOVE:** No picnic on Mt. Washington. On the summit, where sub-zero temps are the winter norm and where the wind-speed record of 231 mph still holds. **RIGHT:** Joe Lentini and Joe Klementovich simul-climb the moderate *Boot Spur Trail*.
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January 24, 2005: Paul Cormier looked like a mad scientist from the North Pole. His graying hairs shot out of the sides of his brown fleece hat, their tips frosted with rime and frozen sweat. Normally funny and sarcastic, Cormier was stone-faced as he fought constant 80-mph winds. Cord whipped around him; pack straps snapped at his hood as he struggled to build an anchor at the top of *Damnation Gully* (III NEI 3).

The previous day Damian McDonald and Susanna Santala had left the Harvard Mountaineering Club's backcountry cabin on the east slope of Washington. Santala had never climbed, but had rented equipment and was fit. The two left late in the day to climb the 1,000-foot *Damnation*. Making slow progress, they topped out at dusk, but faced increasing winds and poor visibility. The below-zero temps and 70-mph gusts made it impossible to descend; the two were crawling against the wind using axes to claw their way forward. Exhausted, they sought shelter behind a few small rocks.

While Cormier labored, his young partner Tim Martel leaned into the wind as he prepared to be lowered into the spindrift. The pair hardly spoke, not because of the wind but because they were looking for a couple who were probably dead.



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Mount Washington is best known for its awful weather, alpine atmosphere and ease of access. It holds the world record for highest recorded land wind speed at 231 mph. The average daily wind speed is 32 mph and in winter two-thirds of the days see hurricane-force gusts. Typically, 250 inches of snow or more falls on the hill per year; couple this with temperatures that have reached -49 degrees F, and you have a dangerous brew for climbers, both in terms of exposure and avalanche potential. Despite the fact that in July nearby Cathedral Ledge can be sweltering, the highest temperature ever recorded on top of Washington is only 73 degrees F.

The atrocious weather and easy access is why this mountain, a mere 6,288 feet high, has seen so many climbing accidents. More than 135 fatalities have been recorded here since 1849. However, for the same reasons, it's one of the country's best training grounds for alpine climbing in the higher ranges, drawing out a patchwork of talented climbers from Northern New England. Locals like Freddie Wilkinson (who lives in a shed) and Kevin Mahoney share belays with mentors like Steve "Father Time" Larson (F.A. *South Face* Mount Foraker, Alaska) and Tom Hargis (F.A. *Northwest Ridge* Gasherbrum IV, Pakistan). During accidents, nationally known rescue instructors like Alain Comeau pitch

complicated anchors into the ice like darts while humble hardmen like Kurt Winkler tend to loaded rescue litters as they tenuously scratch their way down icy slopes and crumbling rock bands.

Many of the accidents on Washington are a result of the hill's unique weather, poor human judgment, or both. The eastern side of the mountain is more unstable: avalanches are common, and although more of an issue for skiers, they often play a role in climbing accidents.

In November of 2002, 11 antsy climbers, in three separate groups, were climbing in Tuckerman Ravine. Three soloists topped out as a second party pitched out moderate ice below. A third party was at the base of the "Open Book," Tuck's fattest early-season pitch. An avalanche, whose crown face was above many of the climbers, ripped out and swept the line, leaving the roped party of two hanging from a screw anchor mid-route. Five escaped the slide, however four climbers were buried in avalanche debris in the bowl of the ravine.

Two climbers were recovered quickly; however two other climbers were not as fortunate. Even with an incredible response time from the Snow Rangers, the avalanche dog and local hut caretakers, the rescuers couldn't save the lives of the two deceased, one of whom was found by following the climbing rope he was holding (but not yet tied into), the other by probe. The slide had run over 1,000 feet.



Avalanches also strike Huntington Ravine, where most of the technical climbing is located. Last spring a party, again climbing underneath another party, was swept by a slide while climbing *North Gully* (III NEI 3). The lead climber was knocked over and sent 50 feet down the gully. The strength of his unanchored belayer and fixed protection left the two hanging from either end of the rope, battered, but alive.

Huntington's face is the steepest on the mountain and is split by two primary buttresses, Central and Pinnacle. In 1910 the forbidding, dark Pinnacle Buttress was climbed by a party of four lead by George A. Flagg. The climbers used a clothesline to protect the steeper sections and soloed the remainder. The entire climb was carefully documented in Flagg's sketchbooks, which confirm not only the topography, but the cruxes, which were rated as "bad" or "very bad." The route quickly became the litmus test for the era's alpine frontiersmen.

Eighteen years later, on October 14, 1928, Robert Underhill, Ken Henderson and three others made the first complete ascent of *The Northeast Ridge of the Pinnacle* (III 5.7), one of the East's premier alpine rock routes. Described in a 1928 issue of *Appalachia*, this seven-pitch route's crux is a dirty chimney that party member William Allis climbed "after much struggle and a certain amount of buoyant language." Other difficult steps were

On a descent from the summit: Michael Finnegan, an intern at the Mt. Washington Observatory, Michelle Day, from the University of New Hampshire, and a staff scientist for the National Forest Service, brace against 80 mph winds.

PHOTO BY JOSE AZEL/AURORA PHOTOS

LOGISTICS

SEASON: Any. Summer and early fall are best for rock climbing if you like dry stone. But don't count on it, nor mild conditions. It can snow any month on The Rockpile. Ice starts to form as early as October in Tuckerman and Huntington Ravines, and by late November quality ice conditions are almost a sure bet. Snow climbing is best in early spring, when neve starts to form. The weather is fickle on Washington, but despite its intensity, this peak will provide a great experience for properly prepared climbers of any level. It is beautifully accessible.

CAMPING/LODGING:

Dolly Copp Campground is just north of Pinkham Notch, the primary trailhead for Huntington and Tucks, on NH 16. The only camping within the drainage that includes Huntington and Tuckerman is at Hermit Lake (lean-tos and tent sites), 2.3 miles uphill from Pinkham, or at the Harvard Cabin just off the fire road toward Huntington Ravine. Pinkham Notch Visitor Center has a Lodge, but make reservations well in advance.

GEAR: Aside from the stiffer rock climbs, a standard rock or ice rack will get you up almost anything. Bring hat, gloves and extra layers, even in summer. In winter, consider packing a stove and bivy kit. These items have saved more than one life.

GUIDE SERVICES: Mahoney Alpine Adventures (www.newhampshireice-climbing.com); International Mountain Climbing School (www.ime-usa.com); Synnott Mountain Guides (www.newhampshireclimbing.com); Eastern Mountain Sports Climbing School (www.emsclimb.com)



overcome by having one climber stand on the shoulders of another. Regardless of this technique, the popular climbing clothing of the generation was a derby hat, jacket and tie, demonstrating the era's interpretation of what it meant to climb in good style. More difficult variations were later established by Underhill and Fritz Wiessner.

Other quality alpine rock routes and scrambles dot the apron of Mount Washington, however they are either undocumented or under-documented. Unnamed dihedrals and cracks ranging from 5.6 to 5.10 teeter above Tuckerman Ravine just under the Lion's Head buttress, the path that leads to Washington's summit. Three buttresses, which go by names ranging from the Cathedrals to Larry, Curly and Moe, crown the Boot Spur Ridge, hovering over some of Tuckerman's steepest couloirs, which are fine snow climbs in themselves. These buttresses and ridges harbor surprisingly solid rock, and the lack of chalk and boot-black provide climbers with a sense of adventure and exploration.

One of Washington's most remote and exposed cirques is the giant, 1,800-foot deep Great Gulf. A stout 6.5-mile approach makes climbing the ravine's 1,000-foot headwall a serious endeavor, despite the moderate nature of its ice routes, which are no harder than NEI 3. They are poorly documented,

but the first recorded ascent was impressive, requiring twice the distance of the modern approach. The giant north face was climbed in 1905 by three Appalachian Mountain Club employees, George Whipple, Warren Hart and Herschel Parker, who is perhaps best known for exposing Frederick Cook's false claim to the first ascent of Denali. The climb required laborious step chopping. According to Whipple, a fall would have resulted in spending "the rest of [their] lives sliding down a snow slope."

Better known and more frequently visited than the Great Gulf, Huntington Ravine is home to some of the country's most important early ice-climbing accomplishments, ushering in a new period of advancement in American alpinism. Dartmouth climbers John Holden and Nathaniel Goodrich tackled *Central Gully* (II NEI 2) in 1927. Within two years, neighboring *Odell Gully* (II NEI 3) was climbed by its brazen namesake, Noel Odell, a visiting British geologist. Cutting steps, Odell and his party surmounted steep ice bulges and sustained alpine ice, conquering what was, at the time, the boldest climb on Washington. Huntington's five other mixed snow and ice climbs fell over the next two decades; *Damnation Gully* was the last to be climbed, in early 1943 by William L. Putnam and Andrew J. Kaufman. While it



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is the longest alpine route in Huntington, it is often overlooked by climbers in pursuit of one of New England's most classic plumbs, *Pinnacle Gully* (III NEI 3+).

The first ascent of *Pinnacle Gully*, formerly known as *Fall of the Maiden's Tears*, is, according to Northeast climbing historians Guy and Laura Waterman, "the landmark climb of prewar northeastern ice." Various Yale and Harvard climbers, including Bradford Washburn, had eyed or attempted the climb, but it wasn't until the relatively inexperienced Julian Whittlesey and Sam Scoville kicked steps up to the top of *Pinnacle* that alpinism took this leap forward, as the Watermans contend, in terms of "vision and mental attitude."

For the next four decades *Pinnacle Gully* stood as the most feared and difficult winter route in the Northeast. However, as with most ice routes established during the era, *Pinnacle's* reputation for challenge diminished after Yvon Chouinard introduced America to short tools, innovative picks and the revolutionary front-point technique. Using this arsenal, he and Jim McCarthy climbed *Pinnacle Gully* for the first time without the need for step-cutting during the winter of 1970.

By today's standards most of the climbs, both rock and alpine, on Mount Washington are considered moderate. Huntington's bulky

Central Buttress holds a few difficult, stellar lines, like *Mechanic's Route* (III 5.10b) and *Roof of the World* (III 5.11d). These two routes were established by Ed Webster, the first solo and the second with Kurt Winkler, in 1987. While most of Mount Washington is climbed out, there is still some potential, although as Webster found on *Mechanic's Route*, ancient pins and even manila slings are occasionally discovered, lending doubt to any claims to virgin ground. The most recent new activity has been a trio of steep lines, including an A2 crack, that climb the huge, lichen-splattered overhanging wall of Pinnacle Buttress, established in 2004 by Aleksey Shuruyev, Katya Vorotnikova, Sergei Motusevich and Dmitry Shirokov.

Despite their moderate difficulty, climbs on Washington frequently turn into horror shows with the addition of cataclysmic weather, blowing fog and avalanches. Last year a climber was killed by an avalanche on *Odell Gully*. In 2001 a ruptured ice dam sent the Harvard Mountaineering Club Hut's caretaker Ned Green down *Damnation* to his death. In 1982 Albert Dow, a member of Mountain Rescue Service, was buried by an avalanche while on a search and rescue mission to locate two missing climbers. They survived. Dow did not. A rescue cache in his honor now stands in the floor of Huntington Ravine.

As rime slowly grew on the rocks around McDonald and Santala, their body temperatures fell. It was 17 degrees below zero without the wind chill, and SAR teams were in a race against time. Martel and Cormier labored in the whiteout, rime ice building on their hoods. Higher on the mountain, unbeknown to the two rescuers, Santala and McDonald were becoming profoundly hypothermic, but had successfully endured the night. McDonald, in single boots, had suffered severe frostbite, partially in an attempt to shield his partner from the incessant winds. Surviving an open bivy on Mount Washington is unlikely, as is a break in the weather. Miraculously, at around 8:30 a.m., both of those improbabilities occurred. The clouds thinned, allowing Marc Chauvin, an Everest veteran and local guide, to spot the pair, frostbitten and wind-bludgeoned but alive. A thousand feet below, barely visible, the red cross on the door of the Dow cache peeked through the trees for an instant before the gray, lifeless fog of Mount Washington once again swallowed it.

Brian Irwin is a member of Mountain Rescue Service and the Mount Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol. A frequent contributor to Rock and Ice, he lives in Madison, New Hampshire.