





DARK SHADOWS & WHITE GHOSTS

TWO NEW HAMPSHIRE NOTCHES OFFER UP THE BEST ICE IN THE EAST

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BRIAN IRWIN

All winter the flows on the thousand-foot Cannon Cliff, in Northern New Hampshire, come and go. The dome that makes up Cannon's innards is a moist pile of earth and rock, ringed with lakes and seeping year-round.

Two years ago the cliff awoke to the best set of conditions in memory. Ice rippled in strips down the entire wall, basting blank faces, opening up new possibilities—like *The Ghost*, a Grade V rock route up to the cliff's tallest point, established as a big-wall climb by Paul Ross, John Bragg and Michael Peloquin in 1971.

The second pitch of *The Black Dike* (WI 5) is typically thin and often considered an exercise in psychological pro.

“I’d been waiting for years for *The Ghost* to come in,”

recalls Kevin Mahoney, an area climber and guide. Some people, he said, had been waiting decades for the ice to touch down. “It never formed fully until that year.”

His friend Elliot Gaddy had just been guiding a winter mountaineering course on Mount Washington. A rain event washed out the course, with weather Gaddy calls truly “miserable,” but that weather also made the Cannon ascent possible.

Gaddy says, “It rained for two days and then the temps dropped. Everything locked up.” He spent 20 minutes at the base area chiseling his car door open to head home. Within an hour of his return, the phone rang. Mahoney was on the line: *The Ghost* was in, he said. The pair set out the next morning.

“The approach was frozen rain crust,” Gaddy says. “It was just strong enough to hold your weight for a moment before you’d punch through to your crotch.” The two spent the majority of the approach “baby crawling” on their hands and knees.

The climb, and the entire cliff, were plastered in ice, conditions that may come in, transiently, once a decade. And it didn’t last long. “It got mushy halfway up,” says Gaddy. “By the third pitch I was unable to look up as I followed. Water was pouring on my head.”

Gaddy led the first pitch, and Mahoney took over through two pitches of delicate, thin ice. Gaddy then closed the route with a fourth, final pitch to where the ice ended.

He remembers the route as “extremely runout. But not unprotectable. I did get one piece on the last pitch. But we never did place an ice screw. That would have been nice.”

And just like a ghost, the route disappeared. When the two rapped the route they found that the second pitch, arguably the crux, had disappeared, leaving only a footprint of moisture on the steep granite wall.

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annon is a fickle cliff with a long, rich and continuing alpine history. In winter Cannon is bitter cold, enduring downdraft winds from its summit torrent, and persistent foul weather that tears through Franconia Notch most days of the week.

East-facing, the cliff not only leaves climbers blind to incoming storms, but offers few descent options. To bail from high on Cannon is a recipe for an epic. It may be the East’s most committing wall, and is the region’s crown jewel of alpine climbing. While *The Black Dike* is one of the most reliable climbs in New Hampshire, its neighboring *Fafnir* (IV NEI 5) and *Lila* (IV NEI 4+ M6) form later or not at all. Even when such climbs are fat, they often require mixed moves or aid.

Cannon is a huge chunk of rock with unpredictable conditions, variable rockfall and an expanse of lines. All told, it is one of the country’s best cliffs for preparing for serious alpine endeavors, and has been utilized by a litany of vetted adventure climbers, from Jim Donini and Henry Barber to the talents of today. In New England, traditions die hard and no quality piece of stone is neglected: Cannon remains a training ground for modern locals.

The Black Dike is Cannon’s most popular ice line, most years coming into condition before Halloween. *The Dike* was once considered one of the most serious ice climbs in the country. Yvon Chouinard published an article in 1971 in the Sierra Club journal declaring the route “a black, filthy, horrendous icicle 600 feet high. Unclimbed.” John Bouchard, 19 at the time, responded to the challenge that winter, in an often-told solo epic in which he lost a mitten, broke a pick, and had to untie from his rope on the first pitch. *The Black Dike* was the first Grade 5 in the region.

By 1974 Bouchard and Rick Wilcox were barely out of their teens, but already two of the best ice climbers in the country. That January the pair embarked on another new route on Cannon, a series of steep corners linked by patches of thin ice, up the Duet Buttress. Modern cams were still four years away, and the term “mixed climbing” had not yet been coined.

“We used pins almost exclusively,” Wilcox recalls. “We might have used one nut, and no ice screws.”

The climb, which would be named *Icarus* (IV 5.8 A4), took three days and a bivy, with nighttime temperatures around 10 degrees.

On the third morning Wilcox cast off, eventually passing the lead to Bouchard, who had just been polishing his skills in the Alps. Two pitches from the top, Bouchard was gingerly standing on a flake when it cut loose from the cliff, dropping him onto a pin.

Uninjured, he persisted, starting up again and passing his previous high point. As he eased onto the next-highest flake, it also ripped, sending him sailing, breaking his ankle—high on the cliff with unknown difficulties above. Wilcox was able to lead through; Bouchard jumared behind him, completing the route. On top, the two struggled through gnarled pucker brush to find the descent trail, breaking through fresh snow and finally crossing a talus apron littered with teetering boulders. At times Bouchard would lie on his back, with Wilcox dragging him by his shoulders, he says. They fashioned a homemade crutch out of a branch. Ten hours later, the two limped into Wilcox’s car and sped off to the closest beer store, then the hospital.

Twenty years later, in the winter of 1996, John Bouchard and Mark Richey—who has pioneered new routes on peaks such as the East Face of Cayesh, Peru, and in Greenland and the Himalaya—spent a total of 40 days

The approach to Cannon’s center wall can be a wallow or, in rare thicker conditions, a cruise up firm neve. In heavy snow years it’s the perfect pitch for slab avalanches, which have sent climbers for rides. The *Whitney-Gilman Ridge* is visible just left of center.



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Jaime Pollitte pecks his way up the final section of *The Black Dike's* second pitch. Sticks such as Pollitte's are a rarity on this typically lean crux pitch, which often requires delicate tool tapping.





One of the most representative climbs on Cannon is ***Omega (IV WI 5+)***, put up by Bouchard and Rainsford Rouner in 1976. Wilcox described *Omega* in his *An Ice Climber's Guide to Northern New England* as "an extreme route that epitomizes the desperate nature of modern ice climbs."

Matt McCormick makes it look easy, though he recalls this second pitch as a "completely terrifying detached eggshell," on the classic testpiece *Omega*. The route is thin and difficult to protect.

on Cannon preparing to try the East Pillar of Shivling, India. As part of their training they accomplished the first complete winter girdle traverse of Cannon, crossing a mile of technical terrain starting at one end and finishing with *The Black Dike*. This huge achievement stood unrepeatable by another party until the winter of 2012, when Freddie Wilkinson and Vermont-based Matt McCormick managed with, according to Wilkinson, “A5 routefinding and extreme microbeta.”

Wilkinson lives in a shed. Unplumbed and wood-heated, the cabin, which he euphemistically refers to as his “shabin,” is lined with tattered guidebooks and candles. He and his wife, the renowned climber Janet Bergman, hole up here most nights, living the simple life and often planning expeditions while they build their permanent home in the tiny town of Madison, New Hampshire, where I also live.

Madison is a rural patch. It consists of little more than a school, post office and gas station. Yet this is Wilkinson’s home. Mark Richey has a summer house just down the road. Over the hill lives Kevin Mahoney, a Piolet d’Or nominee for his FA of the 4,500-foot *Arctic Rage* (VI WI 6+ R A2) on Alaska’s Moose’s Tooth. Over the other hill lives Bayard Russell, a polite, unassuming guy and, like the aforementioned, a great all-around climber. They’re all working to build Wilkinson’s new home, and when the snow flies and the compost drums freeze solid, their wood stoves glow, bringing whiskey-driven visions of the next possible challenge. As Wilkinson puts it: “When it comes to climbing towns in New England, Madison is representin’.”

In 2011, Wilkinson and Richey, with Steve Swenson, succeeded on Saser Kangri II, in India, which at 7,518 meters was the second-highest previously unclimbed peak in the world. The trio was one of two parties to win the Piolet d’Or for their climbs. Wilkinson is soon to travel to Antarctica with Mike Libecki for exploratory climbing.

He reveres Cannon—on which he, too, has established a new route, *The Great Game*, in 2010 with Richey—as a gift to Northeastern climbers.

“The weather is really bad,” he says, “and the climbing is uniquely insecure. It’s not super long or high grade, but it feels like 5.11 slab climbing on sketchy gear, a good skill to have in the mountains.”

One of the most representative climbs on Cannon is *Omega* (IV WI 5+), put up by Bouchard and Rainsford Rouner 1976. Wilcox, himself the second ascensionist of *The Black Dike*, described *Omega* in his *An Ice Climber’s Guide to Northern New England* as “an extreme route that epitomizes the desperate nature of modern ice climbs.” Rarely fully formed, this three-pitch climb ascends the southern end of Cannon on a thinly iced slab working up to vertical pillars. A coveted tick, *Omega* is steep and mixed, typically requiring pins, rock gear and varied skills, the lack of which have thwarted many climbers.

Jon Sykes, author of *Secrets of the Notch, A Guide to Rock & Ice Climbing on Cannon*, refers to *Omega* as “one of the

most riotous routes on the planet.” He recalls having climbed it in “nasty conditions” with another Cannon veteran, Andy Tuthill.

The first pitch, 100 feet, took “nasty verglas for the first 20 feet or more until it got thicker,” he continues, “and by thicker I mean two inches, without protection except for two rotten knifeblades hanging in a thin crack. On the exit move the entire sheet of verglas shed ... [While seconding the pitch] I had to climb the rope hand over hand to the next set of features.”

He calls the first anchor “lousy.” The route continued with hooking moves up to a series of “softball-sized dollops.”

“You couldn’t swing into them—they’d pop off. You only had a half dozen to use. Then, after you climb these, you have to climb a curtain and then finish on a solid 100-foot vertical pillar. It was full Grade 6.”

Although *Omega* is itself forbidding, its variations and adjacent lines have been the focus of recent development. In 2002 Mahoney and Ben Gilmore approached an independent line to the right of *Omega*, having scouted it from adjacent lines. They climbed three pitches up runoff ice, through a mixed roof and over loose blocks that Mahoney recalls as “frozen in place after a night of -20 degree weather” to open *Prozac* (IV WI6 R M6). This climb has not seen a second complete ascent.

While Cannon’s ice climbs are long celebrated, its summer rock routes are also some of the finest winter objectives in New England. The *Whitney-Gilman Ridge* (III 5.7), a fin of granite six pitches long that punches eastward, was the hardest climb in the country when established in 1929; now a moderate climb in summer, it morphs into a brilliant winter mixed route with spacious belays, generous face holds and 500 feet of exposure.

While the *Whitney-Gilman* is arguably Cannon’s best winter alpine moderate, the cliff’s harder rock climbs often rime up like the Scottish Cairngorms. With Styrofoam sheets linking iced-up cracks and thin face moves, climbs like *Icarus* represented some of the earliest mixed challenges in New England. In some regards, they were the beginning of a new era in climbing, representing the hardest challenges of the 1970s. However, some of these lines and their varied terrain are still being explored by today’s generation of elites. In February of 2010 Bayard Russell and Matt McCormick established

The debris cone below *The Black Dike* with the *Whitney-Gilman Ridge* stretching up the left skyline. The ridge overlooks *Fafnir*, *Lila* and other lines. The “big-wall” section of the cliff, location of *The Ghost*, is out of view to the climber’s right.



Minotaur (NEI 4 M6), a line adjacent to *Icarus*. Less than a week later Russell returned with Elliot Gaddy to send *Daedalus*, an M7+ that finishes on the top of the Duet Butte, also home to the ultra-classic *Quartet Ice Hose* (IV NEI 4+ 5.8).

Gaddy said of the ascent of *Daedalus*: “There was a fair amount of verglas. It was hard climbing, mixed climbing, with some great gear. Except for the cruxes. Those were runout. Exciting.”

Ten miles to the east of Cannon is Crawford Notch, a 12-mile valley that holds New Hampshire’s broadest variety of ice and alpine climbs of all ratings and grades, from hanging mis-siles to mixed gullies, with scores of beginner climbs in close proximity. Easy access, reliably fat ice and shelter from the wind make places like Frankenstein Cliff’s amphitheater or *Standard Route* (II WI3) some of the country’s best climbing schoolrooms.

On the east side of Crawford sits Mount Webster, 1.8 miles wide and striped with 2,500-foot couloirs. These lines, although not as steep as the waterfalls in the amphitheater, hold some of the longest alpine climbs in the area and offer many challenging slot pitches. The lengthy *Central Couloir* (III WI 3+) starts with easy snow climbing that steepens and leads to a WI 4+ 5.8 variation. Combined with routefinding difficulties, avalanche danger and long descents, Webster’s routes are much more serious than their grades suggest.

While Crawford is known for moderate gully routes and topropes, test-

piece climbs dot the cliffs as well, gems hiding in the dense forest. *Dropline* (II WI 5) is one of the single-hardest pitches of pure ice in the region. Clustered next to it is a series of two-pitch grade 4 and 5 climbs, the most popular of which is *Dracula* (NEI 4).

First climbed by John Bragg and A.J. LaFleur in 1973, *Dracula* rests in a shallow depression just north of Frankenstein’s amphitheater, its shadowy location promoting early formation and thick conditions every year. An iridescent blue wall that would look at home in Ouray, it is a popular first “hard route” for many climbers as well as a perennial favorite for vets.

Frankenstein Cliff’s south face holds a number of superb climbs, although the routes are often sun-baked. In consistent conditions the south face provides a dozen dazzling independent lines such as the sustained two-pitch pillars *Cocaine* (II WI 4+) and *Fang* (II WI 4+). Although these impressive flows are easily accessible from the road, ascents are few, as the routes are rarely in.

This section of Crawford offers some stout mixed climbs, some of them quite recent. In 2011 Mahoney, Russell and McCormick found exceptional conditions on the south face of Frankenstein after a cold snap. Thin lines formed on an unclimbed section on the right side of the cliff, shaping a new route they would name *Pole Dance* (NEI 5+), a corner system to a roof, then a three-foot-wide tube of vertical ice.

Russell recalls the route as “feeling mixed without being mixed.” He explains, “When I apply NEI rating it implies scrappy New England-style climbing. Iced-up cracks [that are] almost like mixed climbing ... but icier.”

The south face of Frankenstein is far from completely developed, the limiting factor being the solar gain. Russell admits, “I have my eye on a handful of lines. I’m just waiting for them to come in.”

Crawford Notch and Cannon Cliff stand in stark contrast. Like yin and yang, each personifies what the other is not. One is a sheltered system of both steep crags and alpine moderates, a place where climbers can swing their first tools or pick their way up untouched stretches of stone and ice. The other is a storied alpine face, the ultimate training/proving venue and no place for the unprepared.

History runs deep through both notches and is still being made.

A few years ago Eric Seifer, Kevin Mahoney and I went to climb *The Black Dike* in early season. Under the tungsten light of our headlamps we clambered up the talus field, easing between upended boulders. We stood at the base of the *Dike*, listening to the tinkling of thin ice peeling away from the rock. After a few words, by common assent we stepped left and onto the *Whitney-Gilman Ridge*.

We moved up the cold granite, weaving between sections of verglas. Splattered swirls of lichen on the rock began to glow in the morning sun. As we gained the ridge proper, the horizon fell away from us, and we moved up onto the crux Pipe Pitch, which hangs off the ridge and over *The Black Dike*. The rock was starting to warm, tempting me into holstering my tool and gripping the frozen rock with my fingers. I teetered on the toes of my boots, smearing on edges. Fingers soon freezing, I gloved back up, unholstered my tool and returned to the straightforward, yet mixed, strategy that is at the heart of every winter ascent on Cannon.

The sun floated over the top of the opposite range, throwing its rays across the valley and onto the giant face where we stood. The nascent ice of *Fafnir* sparkled in the sun before pulling away from the cliff. As it crashed down, the echo of shattering daggers reverberated from deep within *The Black Dike* as we climbed toward the sky.

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Always reliable, the glowing, fat ice of *Dracula* is so obvious from the road below that gawking drivers have been known to rear end each other upon spying it through the trees.