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**EXPLORER**

## In Thin Air, Making a Mark in the Ice

 By **STEPHEN REGENOLD**

Published: January 15, 2006

ON a snowy December morning, 15 miles inland from the icy east shore of Lake Superior, in the hills beyond the tiny town of Batchawana Bay, [Ontario](#), a 52-year-old climber from Michigan was perched and hesitating on the face of a frozen waterfall.



Stephen Regenold for The New York Times

Shawn Parent halfway up Winter's Primer, a first-ascent route.

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The North of Superior Climbing Company, Mr. Parent's Batchawana Bay-based business, has mapped out hundreds of similar frozen waterfalls in the Ontario wilderness, from Thunder Bay, a city on Lake Superior's northwest shore, to Sault Ste. Marie at the lake's east end. More than 200 established climbing routes exist, and many dozens more,

A foot of fresh snow covered the forest floor below; a line of deep boot tracks led to the base of the cliff. Ice creaked and crumbled underfoot as the climber, Doug Furdock, kicked to reset his spiked mountaineering boots. Shards and small white pebbles of ice exploded as he swung an ax into the frozen vertical wall.

"Get your ax solid in the ice," said Shaun Parent, a local guide who stood 20 feet below, holding a yellow climbing rope, belaying Mr. Furdock up the three-story-high formation. Thousands of tiny ice chunks, like shattered glass, littered the ground. "Get your left foot up onto that ledge."

Mr. Parent, a 49-year-old Canadian who has guided ice-climbing courses for 15 years in the Lake Superior region, was conducting a climbing clinic for the weekend. As a bonus, he was helping Mr. Furdock make a small mark in the annals of local sporting history.

Indeed, Mr. Furdock, who ascended the icy cliff after 25 minutes of slow, methodical progress, made claim to being the first person to have attempted and climbed that particular route in the remote Canadian wilderness. Following tradition, he named the route immediately after his first ascent. In future climbing guidebooks, Mr. Furdock, co-owner of a Troy, Mich., physical therapy clinic, will be recognized as the route's pioneer, with all bragging rights his to keep.

"It definitely looked easier from below," he said after rappelling off his new route. Snowflakes blew by, large and fluffy, as Mr. Furdock turned to look back up the wall of ice, which he christened Mini-Me.

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according to Mr. Parent, stand unclimbed and ready for a first ascent.

But the Lake Superior wilderness, and the Batchawana Bay area in particular, is by no means a climbing mecca. Despite its potential, the region is remote, sparsely populated and relatively unexplored by climbers. Its winters are long and harsh, with arctic fronts that may plunge temperatures to minus 40 degrees, not to mention the wind chill. Winter days are short; the black, star-studded nights, preposterously long and frigid. Remnant snowdrifts and ice can be found in the month of May if you know where to look.

Lake Superior, a 31,700-square-mile inland sea, is a dark and steely abyss that rarely freezes over. Waves roll in from hundreds of miles of open water to pound the rocky coast. Rivers rush to the lake from the hills, scoring deep gorges into the eons-old bedrock of the Canadian Shield. And the lake brews epic storms, dumping four or more feet of snow at a time. Its infamous gales sank the Edmund Fitzgerald 30 years ago last November, the wreck found just a few miles offshore from Batchawana Bay.

Climbers see the Lake Superior region as an obscure no man's land between the Rocky Mountains and Appalachia. Its cold temperatures are known to produce brittle ice that can crack and shatter like glass. Compared with Colorado or popular climbing areas in the Northeast, the Lake Superior wilderness is all but deserted, even though there are climbs near Batchawana Bay higher than almost anything found in the mountains.

The savage tools of the sport - ice axes with thin, sharp blades, crampon boot spikes and razor-tip ice-screw anchors - allow climbers to ascend the solid walls of ice that form each year on cliff faces in northern Ontario. The old hills, though craggy and choked with ice, are wooded and lack distinct mountainous summits, causing climbers to focus on the region's frozen waterfalls and ice-caked cliffs. Like vertical glaciers, some icefalls are 20 feet thick and hundreds of feet tall, composed of multihued yellow, blue, white and translucent curtains and columns of solid ice. Gentle picking and kicking with axes and crampons allows passage up the dripping, creaking, cracking, moaning and everchanging frozen medium.

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## In Thin Air, Making a Mark in the Ice

Published: January 15, 2006

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Ice climbing has grown in the last two decades from obscurity into a sport with more than 220,000 United States enthusiasts, according to a new report issued by the Outdoor Industry Association, a Boulder, Colo., organization that tracks outdoor-recreation participation. Dozens of equipment and apparel companies now cater to ice climbers, and competitions are held each winter in North America and Europe, including the toughest, the Ice Climbing World Cup championship events.

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Recreational climbers like Mr. Furdock, who took up the sport in 2004 after he turned 50, may never aspire to compete on the ice or ascend death-defying mountain routes. "I'm not a hard-core thrill seeker," he said. But exploration, especially in the guise of first ascents, is a facet of the sport many climbers love, no matter their ability. Today, almost every significant mountain on the planet has been climbed, and the world's best climbers now concentrate on pioneering increasingly difficult, dangerous routes. Mr. Parent sees his first-ascent program as an outlet for recreational explorers.

Since last January, when the North of Superior Climbing Company began offering first-ascent trips out of Batchawana Bay, Mr. Parent has led beginner and expert climbers up the area's frozen falls. Mr. Furdock had signed up for a special program called First Ascent Private Guiding, which costs \$300 per person a day based on two climbers; if only one climber, it's \$400. (A wide range of programs is available.) In this program, the outfitter delivers the climber to the base of these virgin waterfalls. A guide assists in the ascent, leading or allowing skilled climbers to place the anchors and go first. Climbers get their picture taken on top, their efforts recorded in an official log book and, if requested, a message-board alert posted on a regional ice-climbing Web site.

First-ascent routes range from just 30 feet in height for neophyte clients to skyscraper-proportion epics that the North of Superior Climbing Company reserves for its most experienced customers. An 850-foot route called Stratosphere, for example, was climbed on a first-ascent trip. A middle-aged father of four from Michigan last season completed four first-ascent climbs in a weekend, naming each route after one of his children. A 14-year-old girl from Wisconsin, accompanied by her parents, pioneered a 30-foot frozen slab of ice, naming it with zero pretense: Jessica Climbed It.

For Mr. Furdock, his first ascent of Mini-Me was one of three new climbs for the weekend. After a season of practicing, climbing ice about a dozen times last year with guides as well as independently with his two sons, he was confident enough to sign up for the first-ascent program.

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On the last day of his course, Mr. Furdock plodded uphill in a snowstorm, following Mr. Parent through a ravine that dead-ended at a wall of ice. The climbs ahead were not tall or difficult, as Mr. Furdock is an intermediate climber, but they were virgin. Even practice routes in this part of the province, Mr. Parent said, can be first ascents.

Ten feet off the ground, again clinging to the face of a frozen waterfall, Mr. Furdock yelled down for advice. The climbing rope dropped from his harness; an ice ax creaked under the climber's weight, shifting in its shallow impact crater.

"Clip the anchor there on the bulge," said Mr. Parent, belaying and coaching from below. "You got it, man."

The North of Superior Climbing Company, Box 129, Batchawana Bay, Ontario, Canada  
POS 1A0; 705-946-6054; on the Web at [www.northofsuperiorclimbing.com](http://www.northofsuperiorclimbing.com).

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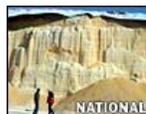
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## Ice-Climbing Destinations

By **STEPHEN REGENOLD**

Published: January 15, 2006

North America is home to the world's top ice-climbing destinations, and the sport, which is a discipline of mountaineering, has gained a following of thousands of enthusiasts in the past decade. Weekend warriors and superstar climbers alike have explored and mapped ice-choked mountains and river valleys from Maine to Alaska. The following is a geographic sampling of some of the continent's best and most popular ice destinations.

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Skyscraper-size routes like Polar Circus, a 2,000-foot ice climb on Cirrus Mountain that takes a full day to ascend, are lifetime goals for many climbers.

**Ouray Ice Park, Colorado.** This park in southwest Colorado crams nearly 200 ice climbs in a milelong gorge. A system of pipes set up to drip water over cliff faces guarantees optimal formation of climbs each year. The annual Ouray Ice Festival, held this weekend, is a must-attend event for hundreds of climbers from around the globe.

**Lake Superior Region, Ontario.** In addition to the climbs of Batchawana Bay, more than 200 ice-climbing routes are

**Banff National Park, Alberta.** The colossal ice climbs in and around the park are arguably the best on the planet.

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found along Trans-Canada Highway 17 on Lake Superior's east and north shores. Climbs range from multitiered frozen waterfalls in woody river canyons to exposed 400-foot walls overlooking the icy plane of Lake Superior.

**Low River, Alaska.** Of Alaska's more than a dozen established ice-climbing areas, Low River, also called Valdez, is the best known. Frozen waterfalls of 1,000 feet and up are found at Low River, 150 miles east of Anchorage.

Northern New Hampshire. Huge ice climbs form every winter on Cathedral Ledge, a 600-foot cliff near the town of North Conway, on State Highway 16. Cannon Cliff, off Interstate 93 in White Mountain National Forest, is another popular ice-climbing area, with routes like the Black Dike, a 400-foot climb. Mount Washington, the state's highest peak at 6,288 feet, has long ice climbs on its high, windy faces.

**Hyalite Canyon, Montana.** Just south of Bozeman, in the Gallatin National Forest, Hyalite Canyon features dozens of climbs ranging from 200 to 600 feet in height. Long mountain gullies, sheer faces and mixed routes, with sections of rock and ice, are among the canyon's renowned ice offerings.

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