

FRIENDS OF THE LEDGES



Tread Lightly: Winter Climbing in the Eastern White Mountains

12/22/2020: There's something special about winter climbing in New England. It's fickle, difficult to protect, and heady. A climb that's there one day is gone the next. The wet, filthy sections of cliff you wouldn't look twice at in the summertime transform into hanging daggers, turf-choked corners, and wild, athletic mixed climbs. But at crags like Cathedral Ledge, there's a lot of overlap between classic rock and mixed routes. As more and more people discover the challenge and allure of cold weather climbing, routes are being permanently defaced by winter traffic. The climbing community is growing but the resource isn't. No one wants to be told what to do, especially climbers. But we need to come together to protect the terrain that sustains us. Here are a few initial suggestions to help navigate the do's and don'ts of modern winter climbing in the Mount Washington Valley and beyond. Join our online community forum on February 25, 2021 to add your voice to this important discussion. Find out more at: <https://www.nhledges.org/events/> Share your thoughts about these issues via a private online form: <https://tinyurl.com/FriendsComment>

Rock Climbing Has the Right of Way: This is a general but important guideline. Is your ascent going to damage, deface, or screw up a popular rock route? Best to do something else.

Dry Tooling Versus Mixed Climbing: "Dry tooling" is rock climbing with ice tools and crampons, without the intention or option of placing a tool in ice. "Mixed" climbing involves climbing both ice and rock. Some routes involve pitches of each.

Climbers are increasingly concerned about the permanent damage being caused by dry tooling and mixed climbing on rock routes in the White Mountains. When there is enough ice, winter climbing can be done with minimal impact. Like so many things in climbing, this is a judgement call. If you're not sure, stick to mixed routes that don't overlap with rock climbs, like the South Face and Hanging Garden at Frankenstein and some of the routes on Mount Willard.

What's "In?": In the United Kingdom, where winter and summer climbers share terrain, the adage is simple: if it's "white," it's acceptable to winter climb. We can apply this same rule in New Hampshire, more or less. Perhaps: if it's frozen, it's acceptable to winter climb. Another way to look at it is this: if you could complete an ascent in rock shoes, (a dry *Diedre*, *Roof*, *Jack on Ice*, or *Pendulum*, for example) best to return another day.

Winter Protection: Beyond picks and crampons, much of a traditional winter climber's kit can ruin an existing rock climb. The damage pitons, spectres, terriers, and hammered hexcentrics do to rock is irreversible. Save the iron for winter-only routes, or obscure, overgrown terrain.

Route Development: New route development should reflect the character of that cliff. No direct creation of holds, drilling pockets, and addition of metal inserts is tolerated by the climbing community in the White Mountains. It is understood that cliffs with loose rock require some cleaning to produce safe routes.

The Grey Areas: So why is the *Whitney Gilman* fine to winter climb and *Thin Air* a no-go? Why can you climb *Diedre* in certain conditions but not others? Ultimately, setting off on any winter climb requires judgement and discretion, along with skill. So, too, does picking an objective. If you are unsure, check conditions and ask around. Preserving the cliffs for future generations is up to all of us.