

Winter Mountaineering: Mt. Colden's Wine Bottle Slide

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Adirondack Almanack

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 2015



Snow cornices decorate a cliff.

It's springtime! Well, according to the calendar. The snow may be slowly disappearing from the lower elevations, but there were full-on winter conditions during a climb up Mt. Colden's **Wine Bottle Slide** on Saturday.

The slide lies 800 feet southwest of the Trap Dike and overlooks both Avalanche Lake and Lake Colden. As the name implies, its shape resembles a bottle of wine. The appeal of the slide lies in its location as well as the technical footwall and cliffs about halfway up the 2,000 foot long swath. If you want to test your winter mountaineering skills, this is a good place.



Dan Plumley cresting a bulge with Avalanche Lake in the background.

Dan Plumley of [Adirondack Wild](#) accompanied me on the trip. We had hopes of topping out on Colden's summit, though exploring the details of the slide was the primary focus. As a backcountry climb, getting there is half the fun and often as time consuming as the climb itself. We began the approach from the Adirondack Loj at 8 am. Nearly six miles and three hours later we reached the south end of Avalanche Lake at the base of Mount Colden. Light winds from the south blew the snow up the great pass, a sign of things to come. We knew the forecast called for increasing winds and snow, and we were prepared for the worst.

The bushwhack to the base of the slide was only a few hundred feet, but involved wading through deep unconsolidated snow. Dan brought a 70 meter rope to keep us safe during the climb. After gearing up – donning harnesses, crampons etc. – we climbed below a large cliff before traversing up and left along its base. The snow remained deep, but a small field of avalanche debris near the top provided a firm base. Anchored to a birch tree, I watched spindrift circle off the delicate snow cornices while belaying Dan.



Dan traversing along Colden's overhanging cliff.

A short climb from the birches led to the low-angle section of the slide about 300 feet above the lake. Beyond the protection of the cliff the wind increased. The snow became semi-supportive, but climbing was still slow as I worked south toward the more exposed slab. Dan belayed as I reached icier terrain.

Exposed rock scoured clean by the wind dominated the center so we climbed near the edge where our crampons had more purchase. The slope gradually increased as we continued up. A couple rope lengths higher we found some short pitches of vertical ice on the cliffs.

When you fight for each step, time passes quickly. It was nearly 3 pm when we reached the cliff bands and set an anchor in the ice. I'd cleared a platform in waist deep snow so we could put our packs down, have a snack and re-assess our itinerary.

The weather had worsened. Heavier snows driven by ever increasing winds pelted us continually. Don't get me wrong, I love climbing in this, but the summit was 1,200 feet higher in elevation and the temperatures were forecast to drop with wind chills -40 Fahrenheit or lower. I had no desire to navigate in a subzero whiteout, so it was doubtful we'd have time to accomplish our original goals.

We played on a more sustained pitch of vertical ice for about thirty minutes before I made the call to retreat. Instead of rappelling back down the first

pitch, we opted to follow an overhanging cliff north. Long pillars of yellow ice hung from the top. Most were fractured near the base or partially rotten, a sign that perhaps spring was in the air.

We began our descent from a small snowfield adjacent to the Wine Bottle and 100 feet lower and a quick bushwhack south put us back on our original track. As we climbed down the weather intensified, but we arrived at the bottom at 5 pm.

I never second guess decisions made in the name of safety, but reflection is a wonderful learning tool. The trek out gave us ample time to contemplate the endeavor. Could we have done anything different? In hindsight, I'd have only added to the gear we brought by packing a few cams and chocks (used in rock climbing). They would have allowed us to take a more direct line from the base instead of wading through snow along the cliff; an earlier start would have given us more time.

We reached the trailhead at around 7 pm, eleven hours from our start. Another day in the backcountry, another day in the Adirondacks.

It simply doesn't get any better.



A mosaic of key locations on slide and route.



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Kevin MacKenzie is an Adirondack writer and photographer, licensed to guide in NY state and is associate registrar at St. Lawrence University. He lives in the Lake Placid area with his wife, Deb (also a freelance photographer). His articles and photographs have been featured such magazines as *Adirondac*, *Adirondack Life* and *Adirondack Outdoors*. Many of Kevin and Deb's photographs are featured on the Adirondack Wildlife Refuge and Rehabilitation Center's website.

Kevin is an avid slide climber, winter forty-sixer and member of Climbing for Christ. His passion for slides takes him to some of the most remote back country areas in the High Peaks. Kevin has climbed over 100 of the area's slides during all seasons. His website and Summitpost forum page contain trip reports and photos from many of his explorations.