

Panther Gorge

Kevin B. MacKenzie

MudRat
Publications

Upper Jay, NY

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Foreword

This fall I've been thinking a lot about Fred Beckey, who died recently after an almost nine-decade career in the mountains. His realm was mainly the Canadian Rockies and the Cascade Range of Washington State. Fred would trek just about everywhere, and where other climbers saw impenetrable wilderness, Fred saw potential routes. Beckey's list of first ascents is probably longer than anyone else's in climbing history, the Alps included. He also leaves behind a dozen or so publications, mainly guidebooks marked by scholarly research and crisp writing.

What made me think of Fred when I was reading through Kevin MacKenzie's *Panther Gorge* wasn't the comparison between the Canadian Rockies and Panther Gorge. That's a stretch. What made me think of Fred was the exploratory passion of Kevin MacKenzie and the encyclopedic depth of his documentation. This isn't a simple how-to-get-there guidebook. It's an attempt to tell the story, the whole story, of the most mysterious and remote pocket in the High Peaks.

Beckey was a quirky guy, obsessive, some would say. So is Kevin. Like Beckey, the self-described Adirondack MudRat began his climbing career without any guidance and without a lot of gear. He just wanted to be up early enough to see the sunrise, and he wanted to see that sunrise not from a window but through a canopy of trees. He wanted to be off the regular trail scribed by humans and out on a real path laid out by nature. God's trail, he'd say. The slide tracks, the stream beds, the slippery vertical gullies – these are more than just lines on a mountain to Kevin. They are callings.

And, man, did Kevin MacKenzie ever answer.

The book in your hand is the product of that calling. It's a look at the when and the how and even the why behind the explorations of Panther Gorge. If you don't know yet, Panther Gorge is the most eerily legendary place in all of the East's mountains. If you were to take a map and stick a push-pin into the center of New York's high country, that pin would stab Panther Gorge.



.....

But it isn't just the remoteness that sets it apart. It's the downright difficulty of getting there and back. Legendary guide Orson "Old Mountain" Phelps said that the wilderness peaks of the Adirondacks gave him a sense of Heaven Up-h'istedness! Yet a lot of early trekkers to Panther Gorge came back claiming a sense of Pain In-the-Arse'dness. They'd lug a climbing pack back there, thrash around for endless hours, and stagger back with a new appreciation for the ease and civility of roadside climbing areas like the Gunks, that rock-climber's playground visible from the New York Thruway.

So a lot of people just wrote it off. They did so because, in a lot of minds, Panther Gorge was better as a concept than a real place. "It was there," as Everester George Leigh Mallory might have said. Just knowing this was good enough for most people. Like wondering about the dark side of the moon, we need to know that trackless terrain still exists.

With *Panther Gorge*, the Gorge is now a place. It has edges and dimensions. Where once there were ghosts there are now some real people. Many of the rock faces have been measured and climbed. The ice drips, too. The big features have been given names. Thus, the shroud has been lifted. But only partly.

My guess is that this book will grab you. An eighteen-hour round trip can't be *that* bad, you'll tell yourself from the comfort of your reading chair. You'll see the photographs, the lines on the big rock walls, and you'll read the story, as told by the MudRat himself. Then a few of you will actually make the trip. Yet despite all the excellent journaling, the meticulous research, the delineations, and the definitions, you will discover that Panther Gorge still protects most of its secrets.

Kevin MacKenzie's *Panther Gorge* has cracked the door open a bit and let in some light. But the Gorge is a big place, and a book such as this one is just a start.

— Don Mellor *Lake Placid, November 2017*



Tamarack on a Marsh. Pen and ink by Nolan Huther.

*Rappelling down the southern side of the Chimney Wall.
No Man's Land, the V Wall, and Little Haystack are in the background.*



Preface

We wander, climb, hike, and ski, each of us seeking that special activity or wilderness area that touches our soul. We pursue a niche specific to our abilities and personality. What draws us? The answer may be simple or complex. Some find retreat in the Adirondacks where, away from the hustle and bustle of “real” life, one can find adventure be it on the shore of a small mountain pond or off-trail in the most remote recesses of the park. Enter Panther Gorge.

I looked across this dizzying void during my first visit to Mt. Haystack in 2004. The slide torn flank of Mt. Marcy met my stare. I had no thoughts of climbing or bushwhacking nor did I consider that others may have done so, but I felt awe and respect for the wilds before me as I contemplated my existence. How very small humans are when compared with the designs of nature. That was the genesis. That experience planted seeds that would take root and grow throughout the years, but I didn’t realize that this remote chasm would one day be the focus of my ambitions. Since then, Panther Gorge has grown into a refuge where I could shed the tensions of life, discover unknown parts of myself, commune with nature, and feel close to Christ. I experience His presence in the heart of creation as much as in church though there is certainly less of a congregation!

My relationship with Panther Gorge is nothing if not an epic adventure, a collection of diverse excursions spread over years that evolved from climbing hundreds of Adirondack slides. This exploration has always been and continues to be a labor of love. It evolves each season and the new discoveries seem virtually endless. The more I visit, the more my curiosity grows. Panther Gorge offers roughly 200 forested and anorthositic acres below 3,800’ in elevation where there is much to explore for the tenacious bushwhacker, photographer, scrambler, or technical climber. Little did I know that the area would become my backcountry home and sanctuary. Some of my closest friends have been an integral part of the journey. What a blessing.

The following text contains a physical description, history of the region, climbing history, and personal narratives. The Chronicles are abridged accounts of our visits to Panther Gorge from August of 2009 through the winter of 2018 – approximately 42 trips. I began writing these accounts, or trip reports as they’re known online, during the early 2000’s in order to describe the backcountry experience to my father, a Type 1 diabetic. The disease limited his range for hiking, hunting, and similar activities. The intent of the Chronicles section is similar. They document the area and share our experiences with those who want to vicariously visit the Gorge via text and photographs. If the reader takes away an appreciation for the area’s beauty, gains respect for the region, or shares in the excitement, then its purpose has been served.

The initial outings involved bushwhacks and slide climbs that built the foundation for more technical endeavors on rock and ice. The logistics of most trips are similar (approach route, times, elevation gain/mileage), so the introductions are truncated unless there are details worth mentioning. Each chapter represents a successful outing. We’ve enjoyed a particularly high success rate as things go in the mountains. There have been so called failures, days when unforeseen or uncontrollable variables necessitated a retreat. We’ve hauled 65-pound winter climbing/camping packs into the Gorge only to carry them out hours later without anything to show for the effort except sore muscles. Yes, we grumbled, then laughed as we found humour in the situation (and ourselves) while contemplating lessons learned. There is value in failure, never doubt that. If you’re one to explore, expect days where the wind is at your back and the sun shines on your goals, but be ready to suck it up and pay the mountain every now and again.

Distance is noted in miles (or feet), elevation in feet, and temperature on the Fahrenheit scale. The Yosemite Decimal System (YDS) is used for rock climbing routes and the Water Ice (WI) grading system is used for ice climbing routes. The overall journey will continue after this book is published whether by us or parties yet unknown. Personal post-publication reports may be found on the internet at adirondackmountaineering.com.

May your ambition for the goal allow you to be a student of the journey.



Adam Crofoot on the Agharta Wall.

Climbing History

The ultimate guidebook for rock climbing in the Adirondacks is *Adirondack Rock* by Jim Lawyer and Jeremy Haas; Don Mellor's *Blue Lines 2* is the go-to ice climbing guide. The books contain a few of our routes, but dozens of others were added after their publication. New rock climbing routes in the Gorge are listed on the *Adirondack Rock* "new routes" page at www.adirondackrock.com. New ice routes are located at www.mountainproject.com. Detailed information may also be found at adirondackmountaineering.com.

Climbing is a team-oriented discipline. This statement cannot be overemphasized. Hubris and competition were not components of our trips as such traits can be deadly in the backcountry. Inspiring and sometimes unexpected things happen when like-minded people join in the pursuit of a common goal. The individual trips and journey as a whole belong to each person involved. Everyone contributes. Many of the routes wouldn't be as aesthetic, diverse, or exciting without the skills, intuition, and ideas of the lead climbers. The objective of each outing was to explore the unexplored and immerse ourselves in the wilderness experience.

There are single and multi-pitch rock and ice climbing routes on Mt. Marcy and Mt. Haystack though many parts of Haystack trend toward single pitch options. In either case,

The Future

How will the next years of the Panther Gorge development look? Will interest turn in a different direction? I've asked these questions at the end of other journeys. The answers always resolve themselves in unexpected and exciting ways. It's doubtful that the area will attract any but the most adventurous souls that are willing to put in a full day and even bleed a bit. Access will always be via a long approach and requisite bushwhack. No matter how it evolves, there is room for further ice and rock development – a new era – in this rugged Eden. The following chart lists the history of known first ascents in Panther Gorge as of the publication of this book.

YEAR/DATE	NAME	AREA	GRADE	FIRST ASCENSIONISTS
1936	n/a	unknown	n/a	Jim Goodwin & Kids
1965 Aug	Panther's Fang	Marcy-Panther Den	5.8+	Craig Patterson, Ronald Dubay
1978 Sept	Marcy's Great Chimney (aka Empty Tomb)	Marcy-Chimney Wall	5.8	Dave Jackson, Scott Olsen
1999	Agharta	Marcy-Agharta Wall	WI4-	Christian Fracchia, Charlie Dickens
2003	Cloudsplitter	Marcy-Agharta Wall	5.9	Bill Schneider, Nic Gladd
2003	Le Chat Noir	Marcy-Panther Den	5.8+	Bill Schneider, Adam Crofoot, Nic Gladd
2003	The Cat's Meow	Marcy-Feline Wall	5.7+	Bill Schneider, Adam Crofoot, Nic Gladd
2003	Toma's Wall	Marcy-Agharta Wall	5.8	Bill Schneider, Chad Kennedy
2004	Puma Concolor	Marcy-Panther Den	5.10a	Colin Loher, Bill Schneider
2009 Sep 19	Kat Nap	Marcy-Agharta Wall	5.9+	Josh Josten, Conor Murphy, Andrea Hoffman
2010 Jul 4	Bushy Pussy	Marcy-Feline Wall	5.9+	Mark Toso, Willow Toso
2012 May 12	The Margin Slide	Marcy-East Face	5.3	Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Greg Kadlecik
2013 Sep 6	Ranger on the Rock	Marcy-East Face	5.6	Anthony Seidita, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2014 Jun 1	Haycrack	Haystack South End	5.4	Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Anthony Seidita
2014 Jul 12	All Things Holy	Haystack-V Wall	5.7	Adam Crofoot, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2014 Aug 16	Wreck of the Lichen Fitzgerald	Marcy-Agharta Wall	5.8+	Adam Crofoot, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2014 Aug 16	For Whom the Lichen Tolls (pillar)	Haystack-Pillars	5.9	Adam Crofoot, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2014 Sep 27	CrazyDog's Halo	Marcy-Agharta Wall	5.8	Adam Crofoot, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2014 Sep 27	Watery Grave (Top Rope)	Marcy-Agharta Wall	5.10a	Adam Crofoot
2015 Mar 14	Pi Day	Marcy-Overhang Slide	WI3+	Adam Crofoot Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Anthony Seidita
2015 May 30	All Battered Boyfriends	Haystack-Ramp Wall	5.7	Allison Rooney, Adam Crofoot, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2015 May 30	Less Than Zero	Haystack-Ramp Wall	5.5	Adam Crofoot, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Allison Rooney
2015 May 30	Eye for an Eye	Haystack-Ramp Wall	5.8	Allison Rooney, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Adam Crofoot
2015 Jun 14	Cat on a Wet Tin Roof	Marcy-Panther Den	5.8	Bill Schneider, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2015 Jul 11	Rumours of War	Marcy-Huge Scoop	5.9	Hunter Lombardi, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2015 Aug 1	Kitten's Got Claws	Marcy-Feline Wall	5.7+	Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Justin Thalheimer
2015 Aug 30	The Pride	Marcy-Huge Scoop	5.9-	Bill Schneider, Adam Crofoot, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie
2015 Sept 19	Promised Land	Marcy-Panther Den	5.8	Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Dan Plumley
2016 Jan 30	By Tooth and Claw	Marcy-Panther Den	WI4	Bill Schneider, Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Devin Farkas
2016 Mar 6	Orson's Tower	Haystack-Near Pillars	WI3+	Kevin MudRat MacKenzie, Nolan Huther

Circumnavigating Marcy's East Face: A Day with a Forest Ranger

With: Scott van Laer on 2013 August 24

Area: Marcy *East Face*, Unnamed Slide, *Grand Central Slide*

Duration / Mileage / Vertical Gain: 5:30 a.m. – 10:30 p.m. / 18+ mi. / 6,400'



Route: Garden Trailhead to Interior Outpost & Johns Brook Lodge > Marcy/Haystack col > Bushwhack south to Grand Central Slide, traverse base of East Face, climb Margin Slide. > Bushwhack north across the top to a small unnamed slide and descend. > Descend Grand Central Slide and bushwhack north out of Panther Gorge and back to the Garden.

I learned much during this outing with Forest Ranger Scott van Laer. Sharing the trail with him deepened my insight and increased my respect for those in his profession. His ethics and breadth of knowledge were broad. Scott had overnighted at the DEC Interior Outpost; I left the Garden to hike to the cabin at 5:30 a.m. – the parking lot filled soon after. Temperatures hovered just below 60 degrees as dawn approached. The walk up the South Side Trail faded quickly from memory in my pre-awake stupor. What thoughts I mustered fell to what awaited atop the *East Face* and what might have changed since last spring.

I was awake and vibrating with excitement by the time I reached the outpost. It wasn't long before we were walking to the Marcy/Haystack col. Upon arrival, Little Haystack was still blanketed by a massive shadow, the minutiae of its cliffs seemed flat; we'd see them fully lit on the way out. I found the first sod-hole after the *Panther Den* (this is a bushwhacking theme). Some characteristics of the terrain were different from my last visit – there was more blowdown, and some of the drainage streams were wider. *Grand Central Slide's* drainage also had more blowdown across it, something that kept me from recognizing it at first. The changes in nature are intriguing; the cycle of destruction and rebirth, unending.



Left: Scott on the East Face. **Top Right:** New trees grow amidst the storm damage in the center of the Gorge. **Bottom Right:** Scaling the ledges of the Margin Slide.

Along the Bottom and up the Face

Greg Kadlecik and I had traversed below the base shortly after the snow melted when the vegetation was dead and brown. Scott and I waded through tall ferns, a beautiful green carpet below the magnificent face of Marcy. One-half hour later, we came to the *Margin Slide*. We opted for a different line than Greg and I previously took, one that was more exposed on the East Face proper. We friction climbed up the slab and along a ramp. It wasn't long before the magnitude of the day began to sink in. I felt like I was home again.

Scott thought that the face had similar features to *Chapel Pond Slab* and I voiced my agreement. About 200' up and south, I traversed over to the rougher and cleaner rock along the *Margin*. In and of itself this was a bit sketchy and required perfect placement of the feet and hands between bits of brittle moss. Scott continued up the slab along an island of grass and balsams in search of a different line. Seeing a ranger high on the *East Face* with the cliffs in the background was a dramatic sight.

I looked at his position and the slab above – steeper with heavy moss growth. I then set up a belay from a tree as he retreated to rougher stone and tied in. Perhaps it wasn't necessary, but the Gorge is no place to tempt fate. By the time he reached my position, an

audience had gathered high above on Haystack. We must have appeared as tiny dots on the brown-gray face. The rest of the climb was exposed, but with a completely different feel – up through the crux of the *Margin Slide* and on to low-angle slab.

Bushwhacking to Grand Central Slide

We took a short break at the top of the slide to re-nourish, study the topo map and feed the blackflies. Earlier in the week, I marked potential problem areas on a photo. My goal was to bushwhack between the slab and a series of small ledges upslope. I wanted to find a decent overlook, but some things are easier said than done. We embarked on a heading of 29 degrees true north. The forest was dense. Truck-sized pieces of Marcy's overgrown upper ledges had shifted over time to create crevices – fracture caves 15' deep. It was a place of potential danger and exceptional beauty. Some will, in future days, tumble down the face and add to the talus field.



The author in a talus cave at the top of the East Face. Photo by Scott van Laer.

A half hour from the slide top, we approached an opening in the canopy along a wall of anorthosite. One of two things would happen. We'd either have to retrace our path and go around the small cliff or perform an exposed traverse across the top of the white strip of the *East Face* – the area of the recent rock-fall. I caught my breath while Scott ventured forward and reported that it was okay to cross and of moderate angle. The caveat was that a slip would send a person tumbling down 400' of ever-steepening slab and over the cliff above the debris field where our circumnavigation began. The granular stone offered ample traction with an inspiring view. A steady breeze kept the blackflies – late season nuisances – at bay.

We fought the urge to recline for a more prolonged rest. Such was the beauty of our isolated perch. With time marching on, however, we continued and redirected our heading to 326 degrees true north to intersect the top of two small slides between our position and the top of *Grand Central*. A direct hit at the top would minimize the bushwhack.

Hunting with the Pride

With: Bill Schneider (lead) & Adam Crofoot (lead) on 2015 August 30

Area: Marcy *Huge Scoop*

Route: *The Pride* (5.9-)

Duration: 5:15 a.m. – 8:15 p.m.

Reference Plate 1

Two weeks before on 2015 August 16 with Bill Schneider

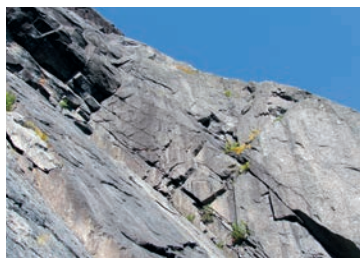
If you do something long enough, you inevitably run into a kink. Bill Schneider and I set aside two days to camp and develop routes. Hit and miss thunderstorms on Friday evening, the night before, soaked the region. We hoped that warm temperatures, light winds, and the sun would dry enough rock to make the trip worthwhile. We'd rolled the dice and come out on top before. The camping/climbing packs weighed in at 55-60 pounds each: about normal. We grumbled but found our pace on the approach. We reached Slant Rock at 8:30 a.m. A few hundred vertical feet below the Haystack junction we smelled smoke, a scent that became more pungent with every step. Our first thought was that someone had built an illegal fire in the center of the trail. Our hackles rose. Instead, we found a ranger, two first responders and a woman packaged in a sleeping bag with a broken leg. She'd spent the night awaiting rescue. We watched the evacuation from above. The thumping sound of the helicopter dulled as we crested the north pass and plunged into the wet forest.

As always I was thrilled to be back "home" when we broke out of the trees along the *Panther Den*. We descended the glade and prepared to ascend an unclimbed corner; Bill scooted quickly up the bottom but encountered wet cracks about 50' up. The water forced a retreat. We hunted for dry stone lower in the Gorge and found an inferior low-angle line dry near its base, but the main walls and best lines were flowing with small rivulets. Our options were dismal and the sun hadn't shined as brightly as we'd hoped. High humidity would make camping unpleasant, and we doubted that conditions would change for the following day. Sometimes the best thing to do is cut one's losses. We cut ours and walked back to the trailhead after 13 hours.

The sting of "defeat" was palpable; the strain on our bodies from carrying such weight up the rocky trail didn't help. We decided that a three-day window of clear weather would be prudent in the future (though I don't always listen to my advice). Another day in the Gorge, another adventure even if it wasn't the one we envisioned! There's a lesson inherent to every trip. Sometimes the lesson is frustrating and humbling – it's all part of the experience. Such days keep one from taking climbing or oneself too seriously.

August 30

Though I'd only met Bill recently, we put our time together to good use with three trips into the Gorge over a month and a half. We were on a quest to finish what we started in June when the corner of the *Huge Scoop* was too wet. The proposed line seemed like a grudge match with Mt. Marcy. We're tenacious (or stupid) enough to continue until we either succeed or get too old to try! "Good things come to those who wait" is an overused



Left: Bill leading pitch two.

Above: Various features in the Huge Scoop.

but often appropriate phrase. When a clear weather window preceded August 30th, we decided to finish the project with Adam Crofoot in the mix. I prayed that the route would be a success. In the end, the experience surpassed expectations. Adam commented, “It would be a classic road-side climb.”

The approach had, by now, become nearly second nature. Pace, breaks, food, etc. were dialed in. Our usual routine places a brief break immediately after Hogback Brook, a longer one at Slant Rock and a final respite to replenish the water supply at a spring near the Haystack Trail junction. Our next stop was the climb.

We arrived at the *Huge Scoop* at 9:30 a.m. I breathed a loud sigh of relief when I saw that the upper corner/roof system was dry. We unpacked, flaked the ropes, sorted gear and readied a small climbing pack with necessities for the ascent. Adam was leading the slab along the corner 30 minutes later which gave us ample time to accomplish the goal if all went well.

While I was belaying, a pebble zipped by with a “whirrrr.” Even small projectiles travel fast enough to do damage. It wasn’t long before Adam had climbed the first pitch (5.7) and set up an anchor in the top right-hand corner. We followed, and Bill began studying



Adam climbs the handcrack of pitch two.

the next pitch; the crux was his to lead. The obvious line followed a crack up a multi-tiered roof system then traversed right to a deep splitter crack formed when a house-sized piece of anorthosite shifted a few inches.

He moved left across the slab to a crack below a precariously cantilevered stone. The intimidating block was four feet long with space between it and the cliff. It projected over the underlying slab, and common sense screamed, “Do not touch!” Bill dubbed it the *Dong of Death*, a name that spawned a string of jokes for the following nine hours. Bill traversed back to the corner after brushing past the tip of the anorthositic “dong.” Lichen made traversing the slab difficult.

He was soon systematically navigating the first tier of the roof; his movements made the pitch look easy as he buried gear deep in the crack of the corner. I watched with a slight bit of apprehension. I noticed two trains of thought passing through my mind. My fear of heights briefly escaped from its holding pen, something that occurs every now and again. I was also in “student mode” – watching and committing to memory how he placed the gear and worked the ropes. The double ropes were placed nearly parallel to one another and positioned in such a way that eliminated rope drag. He continued past the final tier and explored up and left (slightly above the roof). He found that the best line did, indeed, lead to the aforementioned splitter crack. The traverse was the crux of the line. There was little to grab, and only small holds underfoot. Once at the crack, he climbed another 15' to its top where he built an anchor and belayed. I climbed next.

I brushed the *Dong* with my shoulder en route to the corner. Even that made me uneasy. The cliff was comprised of six distinct tiers fractured both horizontally and vertically (such as the *Rumours of War* route 50' to the left). It looked like a portion of the cliff might collapse if the *Dong* was released though that's likely just my perception. Once at the corner, I realized the quality of the route was excellent. The cracks were deep, and the horizontals on the adjacent wall made foot placement intuitive. Bill had placed cams deep in a wide crack that swallowed my arm up to my shoulder. My fear of falling

Between Scylla and Charybdis

With: Laura Duncan (lead P1) & Brent Elliott (lead on Scylla) on 2018 February 17

Area: Marcy *Twin Fracture Gully* (Southern edge of *Huge Scoop*)

Routes: *Charybdis* (WI4) & *Scylla* (WI4)

Duration: 4:15 a.m. – 10:30 p.m.

Reference Plates 1, 10

Twin Fracture Gully is a deep gash that slices into the side of Marcy along the southern border of the *Huge Scoop*. The distinctive feature is 20' wide and deeply inset into the southeastern aspect of the ridge. The main channel splits into dual gullies amidst roof systems at its top. As a drainage for the ridge, it is a chossy wet mess during non-winter seasons, but that sets it up for fat ice when the snow flies.

It was on my winter tick list for a few years, but the thought of trudging that far into the Gorge was unappealing. I kept it in my pocket as a backup option in case a target line wasn't fully formed. Enter Laura Duncan and Brent Elliott, two climbers I met in Panther Gorge during February of 2017. They drove seven hours to share in an Adirondack adventure. We met at the Garden Trailhead at 4:15 a.m. Our primary target was a smear 100' north of the *Agharta* ice route. The potential line looked fat from afar during the *Spiritus Draconis* trip. I questioned whether the bottom of the curtain had touched down and, if not, whether we'd be able to find a way up to the ice. Recent rain followed by a flash freeze sparked my hopes, but longer daylight hours and the dark anorthosite of Marcy were working against it. The only way to find out was to visit.

Hard-packed trails aided with the trek to the col but the crust off-trail wasn't bulletproof as I had anticipated. We endured some bushwhacking acrobatics in the talus and walked out on the snowfield below the *Agharta Wall* 45 minutes later. Its namesake route and *Just Nickel and Iron* were fat. The blue sky and warm stare of the sun were in contrast to the



Laura leading pitch one with Brent belaying.



Laura and Brent enjoying the scenery from the top of pitch one.

forecast which called for partly cloudy skies with 15-20 m.p.h. winds – not good for the smear. Our hopeful line looked terrifying. Melted daggers were 15' from the ground, and there wasn't enough feature in the rock to climb up to their start. The middle of the line was nearly melted out. I grumbled to myself, reset my hopes, and suggested that we trek 15 minutes south to *Twin Fracture Gully*. If that wasn't in, we could throw new-routing to the wind and climb *Agharta*.

The snowfield showed evidence of the recent warm spell – a spear of ice sticking out of the surface. A few minutes later, we were catching our breath in the snowfield near the gully. I climbed up high enough to view the top, and my heart jumped with excitement. I could see ice capping the cliff at the top of the gully. It wasn't simply climbable; it was fat. The six hour approach suddenly seemed worth the effort. I said a quick prayer for a safe climb before the action started.

Laura tied in and zipped up the first pitch. Several women have made their mark in the Gorge including Emilie Drinkwater who climbed *Panther Gorge Falls* during her historic solo of Joe Szot's *Trilogy*. To my knowledge, Laura is the first woman to be part of an ice climbing first ascent in the area. She took the first pitch 180' up to a bulge below the confluence of the dual gullies. It didn't take long before she had Brent and me on belay.

Marcy enveloped us as we climbed side by side on the blue ice. Upon reaching the anchor, we climbed another 50' up to a stance that was protected from icefall. We assessed the options and discussed strategy. Our initial thought was to put up a single long line, but it was early, and there were two obvious choices. After discussion, we agreed that I would lead the left, we'd rappel, and Brent would lead the right. The terrain beyond our view was likely just low-angle ice.

With the climbing logistics under control, I looked around at the amazing ice formations: ramps, bulges, smears, hanging spikes and wind-whipped icicles. The arena had several similarities to *Multiplication Gully* as well as *Haggis and Cold Toast* (on steroids). There were a multitude of other route possibilities. I ascended the first bulge, placed a screw and entered an ice-entombed chimney. A fat curtain on the right, several inches



An icy chimney is one of the highlights of Charybdis.

of clear ice on the left, and a thick ramp underfoot set the stage for comfortable, if not occasionally awkward, climbing. Higher, the right-hand wall opened for an unobstructed view to the north. Large black roofs and hanging daggers were overhead.

I rested in a spacious cave under the roof system. Curtains of clear ice continued north, but I planned to take the line straight up an exposed vertical section. Twenty feet higher, I worked my way into a squeeze chimney of freshly formed ice. The route was still building. I didn't expect to find "plastic" during the climb since we're usually fighting bullet ice at this elevation. I stemmed and squirmed my way into a good stance for another rest. I looked down, and Laura and Brent were back into view (we had lost sight of each other after the first bulge). Another short vertical tier led onto a gleaming white bulge and into the trees. I was near the end of the rope, so I slung a solid spruce and set up an anchor. The length of the new route was 400' with three pitches. It was thrilling to find such a challenging and aesthetic line to lead.

Laura, then Brent, followed. It was impossible to see her progress until she entered the upper chimney.

Her smiling face popped into view and she yelled, "This is the best pitch of ice I've ever climbed!"

That statement alone made my day. I love sharing these experiences with people who appreciate the rugged beauty (and a bit of suffering). Brent soon appeared, and Laura took photos of him cresting the top. Instead of climbing directly to our position, he explored right to see if we should continue the line. A low-angle snow gully led to another short bulge, but it didn't seem worth the effort, so we rappelled down to the confluence and prepared to take on the northern gully.

Our warm, cozy nook turned into a blustery freezer as high-level clouds and a moderate breeze moved in – the conditions of the original forecast. Accounting for wind chill, the temperature was in the single digits. Laura and I were shivering even while wearing belay jackets. She decided to rappel to the packs to heat some soup and take shelter. Brent and I continued the quest though I admit that at the time I'd have been just as happy to have descended with her. I knew the climbing would eventually reanimate my hands. I watched the cedars whip back and forth along the cliff top and shivered again.

It was easier to watch the leader on this line although showers of ice chips occasionally sent me scrambling for protection against the right-hand wall. A few short vertical sections led to a ramp below a vertical curtain. The crux was at the top.

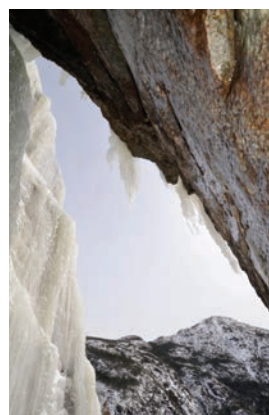
A half hour later Brent reached the trees and yelled, “Off belay!”

I tried to climb fast enough to regain feeling in my fingers. It worked just as I reached the curtain. I stopped to rest and deal with the “screaming barfies” – a painful condition. It was a visually intimidating arena with a few columns that had touched down and plenty of free-hanging mass. One could put up a WI5 here if they were so inclined. A line up the right side offered a more comfortable option. It had the requisite awkward exit into a dense cedar grove – classic Adirondack adventure climbing. Brent’s line was 180’ long.

Two rappels later found us back at our packs and behind the shelter of a small ridge. Laura emerged from the trees looking reinvigorated from a hot meal. It was 4:30 p.m. and the waning sun behind the clouds looked like a soft orb as it moved toward Marcy’s ridge. My motivation shifted from new-routing to something more simple – bushwhacking back to the trail before darkness swallowed the Gorge. I knew the way, but trail-breaking out through the north pass in the dark is dispiriting. We slowly followed our tracks, connecting glades until we reached the *Panther Den* at the top. We then diverged from our entry path to avoid the talus in the center of the drainage. *By Tooth and Claw* (2016) was thin but climbable. Several new possibilities including what looked like a WI5+ on the *Panther Den’s* prow were in as well.

The situation became humorous during the final push to the Phelps Trail while Laura broke trail. She did a fine job of finding the powder stashes which brought her to a screeching halt on the steeper slopes. Brent quipped that she was a skier at heart. At least I knew where not to step. It was 5:30 p.m. when we reached “civilization.” With eight miles to go, the day was far from over.

We named the routes *Charybdis* (WI4/400') and *Scylla* (WI4/180') during a discussion at Slant Rock. Twin monsters of the deep Gorge seemed appropriate, and Laura appreciated that Scylla is depicted as a female in Greek mythology. A warm fire at Johns Brook Lodge seduced us into another rest before reaching the trailhead at 10:30 p.m. Thus closed the “calendar winter” ice climbing season in Panther Gorge.



Left: Ice on all sides and a roof at the top of *Charybdis*. **Right:** View of Haystack from a cave along the route.



PLATE 2: MT. MARCY PANTHER DEN

1. Promised Land (5.8/410')
2. Cat on a Wet Tin Roof (5.8/200')
3. Climb After Slime (5.8/200')
4. Panther's Fang-ca. 1965 (5.8+/110')
5. You Moss Be Kidding Me! (5.7/110')
6. One for the Boys (5.9/75')
7. Belshazzar's Fate (5.8/100')
8. Castle Column (5.9/115')

- A. Grand Central Slide
B. Chimney Wall
C. Overhang Slide

PLATE 8: MT. HAYSTACK V WALL
1.-2. Windjammer (5.7/140') - John 3:16 (W14/140')
3. Psalm 23 (5.7/190')
4. All Things Holy (5.7/505')
5. PG-13 (W14/170')

1

1 2

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Courtesy of Karen Stolz, Vertical Perspectives Photography.

About the Author

Kevin MacKenzie, also known as MudRat, first came to the Adirondacks with his parents as an infant and later moved to the Lake Placid, New York area with his wife, Deb. He is a hiker, climber, explorer, and photographer as well as an Associate Registrar at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. Kevin is also a guide and serves as a volunteer for the New York DEC high-angle rescue team.

He specializes in exploring the most remote regions of the Adirondack backcountry where he pioneers new rock and ice climbing routes. He continues to write online trip reports about his adventures. His articles and photographs have appeared in various publications including *Blue Lines 2*, *Adirondack Rock*, *Climbing*, *Adirondack Life*, *Adirondac*, *Peeks*, and the *Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies*. Additional information may be found at www.adirondackmountaineering.com.

A great contribution from one of our finest local mountaineers. Kevin's work has been useful to me on multiple levels. I have thoroughly enjoyed following his expeditions both on foot and paper. As a search and rescue professional, I've relied on his skills and knowledge several times during crucial situations. As an outdoor adventurer, he has taken exploration to new heights in an old landscape.

Scott van Laer

Forest Ranger (PBA of NYS)

Panther Gorge is one of our great unexplored frontiers, shrouded by myth and impenetrable krummholz. Kevin has done an outstanding job chronicling this remote wilderness, not only with exhaustive research, but with extensive, first-hand accounts and photography. The sheer number of climbing successes revealed in these pages leaves one slack-jawed. *Panther Gorge* is a culmination of Kevin's climbing skill and tireless thirst for discovery.

Jim Lawyer

Guidebook Author and Climber

Panther Gorge is proof that bold exploration is not just an endeavor of the past. The author is as indefatigable a remote explorer and climber as the Adirondacks is unique and Panther Gorge is seemingly untamable, wild and mysterious. This book depicts a dizzying array of climbing routes put up in recent years by many in the rock and ice community while demonstrating the author's conviction that he and his colleagues will always preserve the Gorge's mystique and "Forever Wild" character.

Dan Plumley

Mountaineer and Director, TOTEM Adirondack Consulting Group

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