

ICE CLIMBING THE BLACK RIVER

The Lake Superior region has all the right ingredients for a great ice climbing area; steep bluffs, plentiful moisture, and long, cold winters. About 15 miles north of Bessemer, in the Ottawa National Forest, the Black River cascades over a half a dozen medium-sized falls on its way to the lake.

Unfortunately, the falls themselves are useless for ice climbers, the small size of most, or high flow rates are enough to keep them from freezing. However, the same water that feeds the Black has to get into it somehow. And just below Gorge Falls, the seepage off a series of high cliffs along the gorge feeds some very nice accessible climbs.

Getting there is easy, take Highway 513 out of Bessemer and look for the access road to Gorge and Potawatami Falls Trailhead. This road is not plowed in the wintertime, but there is a small parking area that is plowed. Snowshoes are your best option here to get down to the falls. Take the steps down; find the observation platform for Gorge Falls. There is another set of stairs that heads down to the river. Jump over at the stairs end to the river bank to access the climbs (alternatively, just rappel down from the top of the trail ridge, which also happens to be a named climb, Pneumonia)



The Routes

Pneumonia: Grade 4+, 20 meters.

This is the only climb on the same side of the river as the stairs, about 25-30 yards downstream of the stairs. This route forms late in the season, and may be dubious depending on the amount of seepage. This is a great climb and highly recommended; I once met a group of Tech Students here doing laps on this climb.

Mellow Yellow: Grade 2, 25 meters.

A broad, yellow ramp that takes you up to the top of the eastern side gorge and gives you access to the other routes (if top-roping). I've soloed this many times, not a real challenge, but gets the blood pumping.

Crystal Chandelier: Grade 4, 25 meters.

You'll see this formation from the observation platform. There is a deep cave and it hangs right off the lip. This is a dagger-formed curtain, with a broad, low-angle ramp at its base. It is dead-vertical and my favorite climb here.



Author approaching the top of Crystal Chandelier.

Fallen Tree: Grade 4, 20 meters.

Very similar to Crystal Chandelier, though smaller in size and much more technical, slow to form.

Paradise: Grade 4, 25 meters.

This is a great route, very narrow and nearly vertical to the top.

When accessing the routes involves crossing the Black River, keep a healthy respect and stay alert for conditions. It runs fast and gets early snow cover, thus the ice is suspect. On the plus side, the river is fairly shallow just south of Crystal Chandelier.

Ice climbing is a great way to enjoy the winter season and an exciting alternative to other wintertime sports. Many have enjoyed the area in the summertime viewing the falls and beautiful gorge, but visit this place in the wintertime and discover a whole new perspective and silent beauty of the Gorge.

