

IceFest brings mountaineers to North Hastings



Climbing the Eagle's Nest ice cliff. MARGARET IMAI Special to This Week

By Sarah Vance

The economic impact of ice climbing was underscored over the weekend as hundreds of Alpinists came to North Hastings to summit cliffs outlying the Mineral Capital of Canada, as part of the Southern Ontario Ice Festival (SO IceFest).

"Bancroft crags are at the heart of ice climbing in central Ontario," said mountaineer Andriy Kolos, who is dialed into Canada's Alpine circuit and who spearheads the annual SO IceFest, which brings mountaineers from across the continent.

"Bancroft and Maynooth are very much climbing gateways, with routes extending in every direction," said Kolos.

The Bancroft area's Canadian Shield cliffs, crags and boulders have been described as both pristine and untouched climbing areas. In the winter, cold temperatures, along with natural springs and waterfalls, create the perfect conditions for ice climbing.

"The peaks in North Hastings are unique because while the ice routes are short, they go straight up really fast," said Kolos, who describes North Hastings as readily accessible, in contrast to areas where a great deal of scrambling is needed to reach the goal of a 90 degree face.

"Many of the surfaces are untouched, and some of the overhangs pack a lot of punch," said Kolos. "Ice climbing routes are dynamic and ever-changing in form."

Despite the fact that Bancroft is an established destination for enthusiasts from the Alpine Club of Canada and the Ontario Access Coalition, it is nonetheless under-accessed compared to the numbers it could potentially attract.

"Bancroft does not have a lot of signs to climber access points, which makes it hard for visitors," said an Alpinist who drove from Ottawa to ascend Eagles Nest, the 200-foot cliff across from Tim Hortons.

Several ice-climbing clinics were offered over the weekend from the Diamond Lake Base Camp near Combermere, where a film crew captured the activities and where outfitters and sponsors were on-hand.

‘The summits around Bancroft, like Diamond Lake, remind me of the Adirondack mountains – Mount Marcy and Mount Rumnay,’ said Matt McCormack, one of the event organizers.

After the climb, festival goers packed into the Arlington for SunRun Cafe pizza and a chance to win such lavish prizes as guided Rocky Mountain treks, at the silent auction. The ‘grip’ strength competition, compliments of Mountain Equipment Co-op, saw SO IceFest goers lining up around the packed Arlington bar to test their metal.

‘The Sword Motor Inn in Bancroft is full, as is Madawaska Resort, and we are booked up all weekend,’ said the proprietor of the Arlington. ‘Many climbers are also billeting with local families, and some are camping.’

‘We have provided our sponsors with a lot of return for their commitment,’ said Kolos. ‘The event has surpassed everyone’s expectations.’

Festivals are a popular way for Alpinists to connect socially after engaging in a sport that can be deeply exhausting, humbling and introspective.

Proceeds from SO IceFest are to be directed to supporting Bancroft’s TROUT bus system. ‘The TROUT improves quality of life by supporting local rural residents living at home,’ said Kolos. ‘Supporting TROUT is a way of giving back to a community that climbers love.’