

Mount Sill is an impressive mountain, its cuboid mass looks large even from Highway 395. The original inhabitants of the Eastern Sierra called it "Ninamishi" or Guardian Of The Valley and it is clear why once you have viewed it from the Owens Valley. Even close up, although its summit is lower than some of the neighboring 14,000ft peaks, it still looks the tallest. The first technical climb up Mount Sill was the "Starr Route" climbed by ?????? in (first actual ascent), this the descent route if you are doing any of the "modern" routes on Mount Sill.

First ascent details...

The Swiss Arete up the north face of Mount Sill is a classic mountaineering challenge. You will enjoy a beautiful hike, a glacial experience, will have to cope with high-altitude and then you will be one with the rocky ridge of the Palisades that contain seven of the fifteen 14,000ft peaks in California. Good rock and an exceptional summit experience with great views are the icing on the cake.

The approach from the trailhead is 10 miles (a round trip of 20 miles) with a total elevation gain of 6,353-feet, of which 1,000-foot is 4th and easy 5th class rock climbing with a obligatory moves of 5.6 and 5.7 at the distinct crux. The ability to climb long sections of 4th and 5th class and being able to move over sometimes loose 3rd class terrain solo is required. Wherever you start your summit attempt from be prepared for a big day out.

WHERE

Mount Sill is a 14,162-foot peak that splits the Palisade Crest, located west of Big Pine and approached from the Glacier Lodge trailhead via the north fork of Big Pine creek. The base of the Swiss Arete route is 10 miles stiff hike from the trailhead.

WHEN

The north fork of Big Pine Creek is usually free of snow from early June onwards to the first winter snows in October. Depending on the year there may still be much snow around the Palisade Glacier and on the descent down the L-shaped snow field of the Starr Route of Mount Sill. It is wise to bring instep crampons and an axe at any time of year.

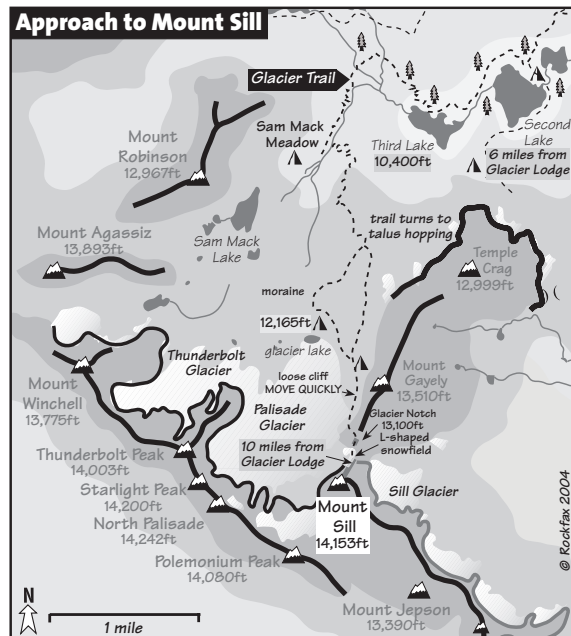
STRATEGY

With an early start fast and competent parties can climb the Swiss Arete in a day from the Glacier Lodge trailhead. Most, however, especially if coming from low elevations, prefer to spread the adventure over two or three days. One day to approach, set up a camp, acclimatize and reconnoiter the route, then one day to climb the route and return to the trailhead. The best places to camp for the Swiss Arete are at Sam Mack meadow or at several bivvy spots near the Palisade Glacier, especially near Mount Gayley.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. See page 261 for how to get one.



CAMPING - SAM MACK MEADOW

Sam Mack Meadow is the camping spot of choice for the Swiss arete being only three miles and 3,000-feet of elevation from the summit of Mount Sill. To get there continue on the Big Pine Lakes trail until past Third Lake where a sharp left turn up through talus leads to this sheltered canyon. Please pack your poop and any other waste out with you, sanitation is a serious issue here. Bear cannisters are obligatory.

APPROACH TO THE START OF THE ROUTE FROM SAM MACK MEADOW

From Sam Mack Meadow take a sharp left across the stream and head up a winding trail (the Glacier trail) through stunted pines and small cliffs. The trail starts to traverse left and eventually hits a loose boulder moraine. There are several lines of cairns leading through the boulders all of which emerge onto superb glaciated slabs. Follow the slabs upwards following numerous cairns to a point overlooking the glacier and below the north face of Mount Gayley. This point is marked by numerous bivvy sites.

The next section traverses boulders and loose scree to Glacier Notch (not a good place to eat your lunch!). Cross large boulders and then loose scree for a few 100 yards before heading diagonally up left towards an obvious weakening in the ridge on the left. There are several different routes up to Glacier Notch. Start by ascending some right to left ramps and then traverse back left over loose 4th class terrain and eventually up to the Notch. Care is need on this section and some people may want to make a short rap on the return trip (no fixed anchors).

You get a superb view of the whole route from Glacier Notch. If you are feeling confident leave you gear here and ascend diagonally across scree to the base of the route.



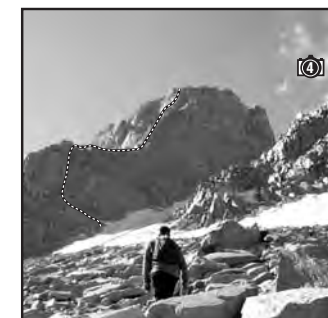
1. On the glacier trail beyond Sam Mack Meadow en route to Mount Sill.



2. The glaciated slabs before you start the traverse along the base of Mount Gayley and the traverse up ledges to Glacier Notch.



3. Approaching Glacier Notch from the traverse along Mount Gayley The ledges up to the notch can be loose and route finding tricky. Some may want to rope up.



4. From Glacier Notch approaching the base of the route



EQUIPMENT

Rack: Standard alpine rack: one set of stoppers (Rocks 1 to 8), Cams #1 to #3, long slings (if it is a big snow year or early in the season take an ice axe/instep crampons for the descent)

THE ROUTE

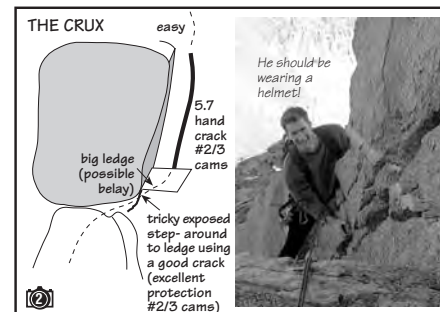
There is around 800ft of climbing to the summit from the start of the route. Much of the climbing is 4th and 5th class on generally excellent rock. There are many ledges for belays. You can run a rope length out and belay, as there are many belay opportunities. Some may prefer to move roped together on the easier ground and belay for the steeper technical sections. The route starts up slabs to join the arete/ridge proper. There are several alternatives here. One option is marked on the photo-topo and is described here.

Easy 3rd class slabs lead up left for 200' to a point overlooking a big corner (marked above). Head up steeper 4th and 5th class ground following cracks to emerge on the ridge crest at a flat area. Easy climbing along the ridge leads to a point at which it steepens. Now follow beautifully solid 5th class cracks and flakes up the crest for a couple of pitches until the way is blocked by a steep smooth wall.

The next section is the crux (see topo). Make an airy step right into a corner (good crack) and up to a sloping ledge, possible belay. Climb a steep crack in the corner or on the right wall to easier ground. This whole section is about 70'. After the crux, romp up fantastic 4th/5th class ground (many ways to go) to emerge at the summit!



Fourth class ridge climbing, low down on the route. The crux can be seen high above near a large smooth block.



Climbing after the crux: good rock, good gear, easy 5th class to the summit. There are several ways to go.



Boulderer Bob Banks on top of his world, the summit of Mount Sill after climbing the Swiss Arete.

THE DESCENT

Descend 3rd class ground down the SW ridge for 200 - 300' to a point where it starts to ease in angle and there is a small notch marked by a substantial cairn. From the cairn down climb steep 4th class ground for 70' then start to trend right across ledges. There is a fixed rap point here that might be needed early in the season or if you are feeling a bit gripped. There seems to be a line of descent down left but this is NOT the way to go. Climb up a few feet to a saddle between Apex Peak and Sill and you will see an easier angled chute leading down to the base of the route. Keep to the left of the snow and zigzag down through loose boulders. At the bottom of the chute you will probably need to make one rap depending on snow conditions. There are at least 2 rap points. Head back across scree to Glacier Notch

