

Trends

Monkeying Around

Recreational tree climbing takes root

As a kid I loved to climb trees, and a tall maple in the backyard was my tree of choice. I would ascend the lower branches and settle into a “Y” notch where the tree split into two prominent halves. For me, that tree was Nature’s jungle gym, a portal for adventure that fueled my love of the outdoors.

Today I’ve transitioned to rock climbing, but have never forgotten my arboreal roots. So imagine my delight upon discovering the growing sport of recreational tree climbing, which blends technical climbing and arborist skills to create a new and distinct sport.

Now I’ve traveled to Evergreen, Colo.,

to learn the ropes from Harv Teitelbaum, a grey-mustachioed tree-climbing instructor. As part of an introductory class, I’m slated to ascend a majestic 90-foot ponderosa pine. Most recreational tree climbers name their favorite trees—Lancelot, Old Scratchy, Nimrod—and so I dub my ponderosa “Rosie.”

After donning my saddle, a specialized tree-climbing harness, I prepare to ascend using the popular and ultra-safe Doubled Rope Technique. High overhead, a single rope runs up and over a sturdy limb and back down to the ground, yielding two strands that are used for the climb. Tree climbers abide by sport-specific principles to minimize

their impact on the tree, and a cambium saver, a flexible hollow tube through which the rope runs over the anchor branch, protects the tree from abrasion.

Fifteen minutes later, having methodically hoisted myself to a perch 70 feet above the ground, I sit back in a three-point stance to admire the view.

Midday sun filters through the branches, and a cool breeze rustles the needles above and below. The chirping of songbirds and unseen insects surround me at eye and ear level. Looking down at the ground far below, I imagine myself surreptitiously spying some elusive animal unaware of my presence high overhead. The entire experience combines to create a sense of overwhelming peace and calm... the same sensation I feel lounging on a mountain summit, or dipping my feet into a cool pond during a long hike. This, Harv later tells me, is what tree climbing is all about.

Update

Congress trims Forest Legacy, snubs Highlands Act

AT THE END OF JULY, CONGRESS PASSED THE INTERIOR Appropriations Bill for fiscal year 2006, doling out funds for conservation projects across the country.

The federal Forest Legacy program provides states with financial assistance to help protect forestlands from development. Earlier this year, the President submitted a proposed \$80 million budget for the program to Congress. After trimmings by the House and Senate, Congress ultimately approved \$57 million, a \$1 million decrease from last year.

The news was good in Maine, where \$6 million in Forest Legacy funding was allocated, including \$4.5 million to support AMC’s Maine Woods Initiative. Governor John Baldacci had endorsed funding for AMC’s 37,000-acre Katahdin Iron Works parcel as the state’s top Forest Legacy project. While the President’s budget included \$5 million for the project, the final number of \$4.5 million was greeted with appreciation.

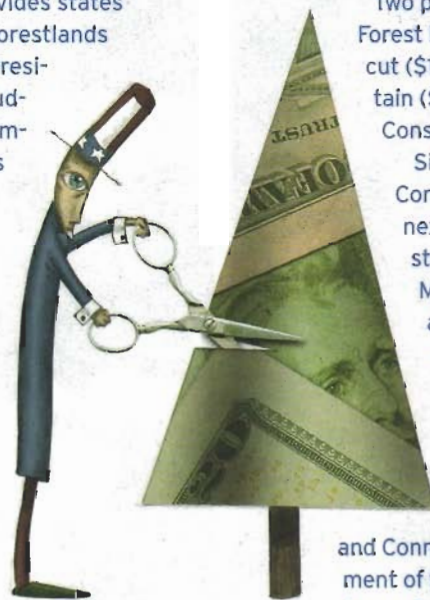
“We are deeply thankful for the strong support AMC’s Maine Woods Initiative has received in this difficult budget climate,” comments AMC Director of Conservation Susan Arnold. “The endorsements of our state

and local partners were crucial, and the tenacity shown by Maine’s Congressional delegation to obtain this level of funding cannot be underestimated.”

Two projects in the Highlands region received Forest Legacy funding: Skiff Mountain in Connecticut (\$1.2 million) and New Jersey’s Sparta Mountain (\$1.8 million). But the news for the Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) was less encouraging.

Signed into law in November, HCA authorizes Congress to appropriate \$110 million over the next 10 years for conservation and ecological study in the Highlands region (see News, March). But Congress failed to appropriate anything for HCA in FY 2006. “We were at a disadvantage because the act was passed so late in the year,” explains AMC Highlands Advocate Kristen Sykes. She remains optimistic about future funding, citing the fact that the governors of all four Highlands states (Pa., N.Y., N.J.,

and Conn.) jointly submitted a letter to the Department of the Interior outlining the projects they’d like to see funded. “It’s quite a feat to have governors get together and agree on anything,” she says. “Especially when two are Democrats and two are Republicans. Such bipartisan support gives us high hopes for the future.” —M.H.





Aspiring tree climbers hang out in the canopy as they learn the ropes of this new sport.

Peter Jenkins, a rock climber turned certified arborist, is widely credited with founding recreational tree climbing in Georgia in 1983. Since then, the sport has “grown by leaps and bounds,” says his wife, Patty, who manages Tree Climbers International (TCI), the Georgia-based group that has grown into one of the sport’s leading authorities. Today its website receives more than 12,000 hits per day, and the organization regularly adds classes to meet the budding demand.

Recreational tree climbers say they are drawn to the sport for a host of reasons: the physical exercise, the invigoration of stepping into the vertical world, and the opportunity to get closer to nature, whether through birdwatching, photography, or by connecting with the spiritual aspects of trees. Regardless, the sport enjoys broad appeal, from young children to thirty-something couples to active retirees.

In the Northeast, a small but growing number of enthusiasts are heading into the canopy. Andrew Joslin, a 49-year-old visual designer for IBM, lives in Boston’s Jamaica Plain. An amateur naturalist, he discovered the sport from a *New Yorker* article and now climbs two to three times per week. Ed Dietrich, 56, owns a heating

and air conditioning business in Petersburg, N.J. He climbs four times per week, mostly in a 75-foot sycamore in his backyard. He often ascends with the older two of his four grandchildren. “Every time we get together, they beg me,” he says. “Can we climb?”

Joslin, Dietrich, and Teitelbaum all learned to climb at the TCI school in Georgia, a fact that highlights a major hurdle to the sport’s growth in the Northeast—the lack of a regional tree climbing school. But all that may be changing. It’s too early to name names, dates, or specific locations, but Patty Jenkins predicts that a tree climbing school will open somewhere in Massachusetts within the next year.

Until then, tree climbing will continue to grow grassroots, or perhaps more appropriately, treeroots style in the Northeast, something that Joslin is pleased about. “It may be that I’m a natural tree hugger,” he admits. “But when you’re climbing in a tree you feel more connected to nature, and that’s something most of us can use more of.”

—Peter Bronski’s articles (www.peter-bronski.com) have appeared in *Adirondack Life*, *Adventure Sports*, *Men’s Edge*, and *Sea Kayaker*.

The entire experience combines to create a sense of overwhelming peace and calm.

PHOTOGRAPH: PETER BRONSKI

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