Scrambling Skills part 1

Scrambling is where mountain walking stops and mountaineering begins, but what skills do you need to tackle higher graded routes? Over the next couple of issues, British Mountain Guide Alun Richardson explains the main techniques to use...

At the top of the Chasm Face on Glyder Fach in North Wales I stood on the edge and looked back down the line of our ascent and was left with the question: was it a scramble or was it a rock climb? I would like to say that the answer was straightforward, but unfortunately it wasn’t, because one person’s scramble might be another person’s rock climb. However, it is that subjective view that makes scrambling such a wonderful pastime. In what other sport can you choose the size of the pitch and the size of the opposition to suit your experience and the weather?

Scrambling is an ambiguous word that attempts to describe the gap between mountain walking and rock climbing. It’s a bit like describing a healthy diet – most of us know what it is, but trying to explain it to someone who doesn’t know proves more difficult. At one end of the spectrum it describes routes that adventurous walkers ascend easily such as Crib Goch on Snowdon and Striding Edge on Helvellyn. At the other end of the difficulty scale routes like Broad Stand on Scafell and the Parson’s Nose on Crib Y Ddysgl are really easy rock climbs. The point is that scrambling is the point at which ‘mountaineering’ begins, and the techniques you learn when ascending harder scrambles will stand you in good stead when progressing onto alpine and winter mountaineering. Learning to use natural protection and ‘moving together’ roped up with your climbing partner are core mountaineering techniques and so scrambling in good weather is actually an ideal way of practising these skills until they become second nature to you.

For me the joy of scrambling is that it takes me away from well-trodden paths and routes into secluded places where very few feet have travelled. But that brings its own problems not least that the very places I am seeking solitude in are often the last sanctuaries for rare plants and animals hanging onto their tenuous grip on survival. We must all therefore give great thought when we are on scrambles to every footstep and leave the delicate plant life untouched.

GRADING

There are guidebooks to scrambles all over the world each enticing you to take a slightly more exciting and rocky approach to the tops of mountains. Selecting the scramble to suit ones abilities is however a bit of a black art.

In the UK, scrambling is broken down into four grades (well sort of) with the grade being based around technical difficulty and exposure. There is a big difference between a grade 1 and a grade 4. Some older Scottish guidebooks used a system of grades 1 to 5, leading to considerable confusion over grades 1, 2 and 3. One must also consider that the weather conditions can easily change the grade. On the continent some authors describe them as easy, moderate or...
difficult. The important thing to realise is that the more difficult the scramble the more like rock climbing it becomes.

Grade 1 - A grade 1 scramble may be exposed, but it is technically easy. Ropes would only be required by the extremely nervous and you may be able to circumvent the difficulties. There may be the occasional hard step where hands will be required. Route finding is obvious. Examples are Crib Goch on Snowdon and the Aonach Eagach ridge in Glencoe.

Grade 2 - Grade 2 routes have longer difficult sections where a rope and rock climbing techniques may be needed. Route finding can be difficult, and escape from the route may not be easy. Examples include: Clogwyn Y Person Aràte, Crib Y Ddisgol and Llechog Buttress.

Grade 3 - Grade 3 routes include lots of tricky sections with many pitches of easy rock climbing. Dry conditions may be essential. Escape is probably by abseiling and route-finding skills are required. Examples are: Creiglyn Aràte, Mynydd Mawr and Shark Buttress on Glyder Fach.

Grade 4 - (3S in some books, the 'S' means serious) On grade 4 routes, exposure will be high and it will feel more like a rock climb – in fact, you may also find the route in a rock climbing guidebook. Escape is by means of an abseil. Examples are: Cyfrwy Aràte, Cadair Idris, and the West Peak via Bilberry Terrace on Lliwedd.

GEAR ESSENTIALS
For harder scrambling routes, you’ll need some basic rock climbing gear

1. Footwear: for scrambling, boots and approach shoes with stiff soles, grippy rubber, rubber rands and ‘to the toe’ lacing will help your performance – see page 86 for our test of scrambling footwear in this issue.

2. Harness: a simple, alpine-style harness is light and comfortable.

3. Gloves: gloves may keep your hands warm/dry, but you must be able to handle the rope with them on.

4. Rope: a 30-35m length of thin (e.g. 9.1mm) single rope is ideal for scrambling, though be aware it will wear out quicker than a thick rope.

5. Rack: the more technical a route is, the more climbing gear you’ll need – see next month’s issue for our recommendations on what’s included in the ideal climbing rack for scrambling with.

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An efficient scrambler is someone who can choose the appropriate technique at any given moment and quickly change between options. To do this well you must make judgements...
SHORTENING THE ROPE
How to take chest coils for shortening the rope when moving together

who slipped, but to an experienced practitioner it hugely improves safety. It requires fluency and concentration and is a difficult skill to master. It is a good idea to practice on non-dangerous terrain before trying to use it on a serious scramble.

There are too many variables for a rigid method to be described here, but it starts with the scramblers using the natural terrain to weave the rope in and around. Should one climber fall, the rope will then catch on a rock feature such as a spike, boulder or a ridge hopefully stopping the falling climber. When natural runners cannot be found the lead climber will place slings on spikes or through threads, or rock climbing protection is placed in cracks. When you come to a section where you or your partner are not confident to move together, climb over the difficulty and then continue as before.

ATTACHING TO THE ROPE
The number of people on one rope depends on the terrain, weather conditions, size and weight, skill and experience. On all but the simplest scrambles, three people are a maximum. The most versatile method for three people is for the most experienced scrambler to tie into the rope and take chest coils (see boxout on left) leaving about two arm lengths between each scrambler. The second scrambler attaches using a rewoven overhand knot in a loop. The last scrambler ties into the end of the rope using a rewoven overhand knot in a loop. The last scrambler ties into the end of the rope using a rewoven overhand knot in a loop. The last scrambler ties into the end of the rope using a rewoven overhand knot in a loop. The last scrambler ties into the end of the rope using a rewoven overhand knot in a loop.