
A 40 foot “limbless” climb...

Posted by Ron - 10/03/2006 06:46pm

I was determined this morning to prune a limb growing from an Ash tree that had grown long enough to contact and rub the trunk of a pine tree near by. The bark had already been damaged and I wanted to stop any further damage.

The plan was to prune the Ash limb where it was rubbing the pine. The problem was the “rub” was 40 feet up the pine. This pine, like most in my yard are in neat rows – planted that way by a company for what ever their need for pine trees were. My neighbor says the trees were “designed” (whatever that means) to be tall and straight with few limbs. Well, it looks like their design pretty much worked. This particular pine is straight, tall, and has no limbs below 70 feet or so and those would be quite questionable to climb on. So, I’d have to do a limbless climb.

I started experimenting with limbless climbing a the start of the summer and had pretty much refined my technique so I didn’t have to invent anything today – just apply the technique.

I had tried cinches around the tree where my belt and foot loops each tied directly to one of the loops – the belt to the higher cinch and the foot loops to the lower. I tried webbing and rope. The webbing proved to be an absolute nightmare. The rope (11m PMI MaxWear) worked better, but it was a slow, inefficient, cumbersome, fatiguing way to climb and after just two short climbs I abandoned that method for good.

The method I developed and used today is, for lack of a better name, short-pitch SRT. It isn’t as fast as climbing 40 feet up a rope, but it is efficient and isn’t fatiguing and it’s probably as safe as it can get – I’ll explain later.

The technique requires three ascenders, about a 30 foot section of tough rope, foot loops and a couple of screw links. I also carried up a 150’, 10mm PMI EzBend rope with a BMS micro rack with two hyper bars to come down on. More about coming down later.

I tied a Mountaineer Bowline in each end of the 30 foot rope. This rope would be used for the short pitch double ended SRT. I made a loop around the tree and closed the loop with a pear shaped screw link. I then placed the loop nearly as far as I reach up the tree and pulled on the line hanging down to make it cinch. Knowing that I would be using the other end the very same way when I reached the first cinch, I went ahead and installed the other end right above the first cinch.

I connected a biner to my floating tie-in on my harness, attached a small CMI Ultrascender and took the slack out of the line. I then attached my foot loops to the same rope with a large CMI Ultrascender. My third ascender, another small CMI Ultrascender is already attached to my floating tie-in in preparation for the second pitch.

I push up on the foot loops and raise my seat ascender. I sit and raise my foot loops and stand again and raise the seat ascender and that’s about all you get per pitch. I stood in my foot loops and raised that second cinch that was already around the tree, as far as I could reach and pulled on the rope to cinch it down. Keeping some load on it with my hand to keep it from loosening and sliding back down, I install that third ascender on the rope I’m holding. I snug it real good and sit down in the harness. That’s usually enough to transfer my weight to the new cinch “anchor” point. I do move up a bit more just as a load check on the new anchor point then sit again. All my weigh has now been transferred to the higher anchor. Next I transfer the foot loop ascender and then remove the harness ascender that now has no weight on it. I unscrew the screw link and simply place the loop over the other rope and re-connect the screw link. A couple of sit stands and I’m to the higher anchor point and I repeat the process.

I guess I gain about three feet per pitch. I suppose that sounds like a lot of work and time but it’s actually pretty efficient. My entire climb, cutting limbs, posing like I was cutting limbs for pics, installing the rappel rope and rack, removing all climbing equipment, and rappelling down took about an hour and 20 minutes and a whole canteen of water. But when I was finished I was a little tired, but not fatigued, in fact, I did a 20 foot DRT climb a bit later in another tree.

Getting down – talk about fun!

It’s a kinda funny, all that climbing and time and once I started rappelling, I bet it didn’t take 10 seconds to “touch down”. I let the rope fly through the rack. I used all four bars on the rack and once over the top hyper bar. I was bare handed and felt the heat from the rope flying through my hands but the rack didn’t feel very warm when I got to the ground.

I really, really like 10mm PMI EzBend for single rope rappelling. It’s good for 5700 pounds and only weighs 4.9 pounds per 100 feet. Rappelling requires a change over. The way I do it starts on the ground. I find the middle of my 150’ rope and tie a F8 in it; I will use this as a pull-down when I get back to the ground. I attach the F8 to a carabiner attached to my belt and begin climbing. When I’m ready to rappel, the process is much like the climbing process. I pull up some rope and tie a double overhand loop and attach this to a biner on my belt. Now I can take the F8 loose from my belt and if I drop it, it’s still attached by the double overhand.

I sling the F8 around the tree and put a screw link through the F8 and one strand of the hanging rope through the screw link and close it up. I raise the loop and pull it tight and maintain some tension on it to keep it from sliding. I install the

micro rack, take up as much slack as I can, and make four wraps around the hyper bars to lock it off.

I then stand just enough to release load on the belt ascender and lower it about six inches. I sit in the harness and notice that the rack is starting to load. I lower my foot loops and stand again and lower the seat ascender some more. At this point, I'm fully on the rack and rappelling rope and anchor. A few bounces to test it and then I remove the foot loops and ascender, then the belt ascender. Next I remove both loops of the short climbing rope, but I clip one end to my belt. I made the mistake of dropping something once only to discover I still needed it.

I unwrap one turn of from the hyper rack, the next one, and when I get to the last wrap, I start rappelling. Once on the ground, I pull the other end of the F8 and the rope comes freely tumbling down, still looped around the tree.

That was fun!

I know, I know that was too long.

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Posted by SRT-Tech - 10/05/2006 02:07pm

your ascending technique sounds interesting, but would be better with some pictures! :D

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Posted by Ron - 10/05/2006 03:13pm

I know, and I'd have some pics, but I had left my camera at school the day before the climb.

I'll stage some pics near the ground to show the technique.

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Posted by Electrojake - 10/05/2006 09:51pm

Yes, photos!
If possible, have someone on the ground snap a few photographs of you ascending at different points of progress.

Sounds interesting,
Electrojake

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Posted by Ron - 10/09/2006 12:10pm

Here are the pics. They're in the right sequence in the slide show, but you don't get to see the comments.

Some how they're in reverse order in the un-setted photos, but you can see my comments and explanations.

This may seem or appear a bit complex, and maybe it is a bit, but it is limbless climbing and it's a safe way at that. It progresses at a pretty good rate and the changeovers give you a chance to catch your breath for the next pitch.

<http://flickr.com/photos/65918986@N00/>

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Posted by Electrojake - 10/09/2006 04:03pm

Hmmm...
Interesting system.

Seems it might get a bit spooky once you're up about 30 feet.
I'll have to give it a try!

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Posted by Ron - 10/10/2006 06:58am

Just curious, why do you think it may be spooky?

I've been up 40 feet using this method, except with ascenders instead of prusik loops and it was solid.

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Posted by moss - 10/10/2006 07:10pm

Originally posted by Ron
Just curious, why do you think it may be spooky?

I've been up 40 feet using this method, except with ascenders instead of prusik loops and it was solid.

Any time a tree climber sees a new life support configuration/technique they usually consider it spooky until they've tested it themselves. Tree climbers are a cautious bunch. It takes time for newly introduced technique to be accepted. One thing to consider is that many rec climbers are not especially interested in this relatively labor intensive way to climb a tree (girthed loop anchors). With the exception of very small trees most trees have something up high that can be tied into. If not, many climbers just move on to a tree that they can get a rope into.

Another factor to consider is that using this type of sliding girth anchor is going to potentially rip up the bark of the tree (as you go up), depending on the species this could damage the tree. There are varying schools of thought on this. Some climbers prefer to have minimal contact with the trunk and will make ascents that keep them off the trunk. There are no hard and fast rules, if a tree species has very loose or thin bark, or attached ferns, lichens or mosses more caution in trunk contact is worth considering

Not meaning to discourage you, innovation is a wonderful thing, keep at it!
-moss

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Posted by Electrojake - 10/10/2006 09:34pm

When working a tree I need to be able to move, especially on first ascent. I keep my escape route planed in advance. You know, insects, animals, dead limbs, crap falling out of the tree on the way up, etc...

It seems to me that being roped-up against the tree trunk... well, if you have to make a quick move up, down, or otherwise, you're in a world of trouble.

Now to be fair, I think your system is kind of neat. I looked at your pictures and plan to give it a try on one of my own, tame trees.

Posts on new techniques are good. :)
It's the very life of the forum!
Electrojake

P.S. moss, yes, good psychology.

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Posted by Ron - 10/11/2006 09:24am

Good points guys. However, my choice is either use my cinch method or don't climb some big, tall pines on my property.

The first set of limbs on many of my pines are like 60' up and if you could see them, I doubt you'd want to trust your life to them - they just aren't that substantial.

Moss - "One thing to consider is that many rec climbers are not especially interested in this relatively labor intensive way to climb a tree (girthed loop anchors). "

It's just a limbless climb method; I'm not saying anybody would want to use it, but somebody posted an inquiry about how to limbless climb, and Joe and Jbird discussed a limbless climb, so I thought I'd post this method. I've found it to be very effective. Sure, given a choice, I'd rather do SRT or DRT ascents, but that wasn't a choice on this tree.

"Labor intensive" may be more perceived than actual. I don't find this method to be any more labor intensive than DRT or SRT. It is slower than DRT and SRT, and certainly requires a lot of pitches, but the pitch changes are much less intense and easier than a double-ended rope pitch is, especially if you install cambium protectors. If anything, this method is less intense because you get to rest more. And anyway, part of climbing is exercise and challenge.

I don't think it's as labor intense as it's perceived to be. I'm nearly 61 years old, in probably a little better than average shape, so I couldn't do it if it was much more labor intense than just climbing. When I finished the 40' limbless climb, I wasn't any more tired than any other climb. In fact, I did a traditional climb about 2 hours after that one.

It could be that the cinch(s) could do some slight damage to the tree bark. But in the particular tree I climbed to 40', a limb from a neighboring tree had already worn a smooth place in the bark. Much more and it would be through the bark. I was much more concerned about that than any slight damage that cinching might do.

Plus, DRT climbing can do far more damage to a tree if cambium savers aren't used on every pitch.

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Posted by moss - 10/11/2006 09:33am

For sure it's a good thing that you're developing this technique. When you get up into the top of one these pines it will be interesting to see if you can get a place to tie-in above the first branches.

It doesn't look like you're damaging the tree you're climbing, just wanted to raise the bark issue, ie: you want to be selective for what trees you do this on. On my backyard Honey Locust for instance, there is no way to ascend it with a cinch type system. The bark forms hard vertical plates that curl out from the tree, snags anything you try to move over it and will break off if a cinch was loaded on it. Whenever I climb it I place my feet so as not to break off bark if possible.
-moss

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Posted by Ron - 10/11/2006 12:01pm

Moss,

Thanks for the heads up on some subtle but very significant issues.

I appreciate the awareness you present for both the climber and the trees - we don't want to damage either.