

## **A Traprock Rappel**

With the foliage on our neighbor's trees still in bud, it's possible to look out our kitchen window and see a slight, grey-violet hump on the northern horizon. At six miles away, The Hanging Hills of Meriden, Connecticut don't look impressive, but their basalt cliffs, rising some 700 feet above the surrounding valleys, can be intimidating on closer inspection—especially when dropping off one of their high ledges on rappel, then getting stuck dangling from the rope half way down.

This excitement happened to me thirty years ago, when I was a young man with adventure churning in my blood. At the time living in Rhode Island, I knew about the cliffs from previous hikes on East Peak, one of the traprock ridges that forms The Hanging Hills. Similar ridges occur in a north-south trending band west of the Connecticut River. In geologic terms, they are the remnants of a rift valley system that formed in the Triassic Period, when a supercontinent began pulling apart. This stretching gradually formed the Atlantic ocean to the east, as well as much smaller depressions—the rift valleys—that occur from Newfoundland down to at least North Carolina. The rock crust in these valleys thinned and cracked, allowing lava to spew upwards and flood the

land. The lava cooled into layers of basalt, or traprock, which was then covered by sedimentary rock. Over time the land tilted and subsequently eroded, leaving these rusty-red elevations—offering an excuse to test myself and my brand new climbing rope.

At the top of a particularly sheer cliff, I discovered a narrow slab slightly detached from the main mass of rock. I climbed down a bit to reach it, laid my equipment out, then took a deep breath. Fear hummed in my body like a high power line—telling me this was not such a great idea, that I didn't know what I was doing, that I was at the border of the unknown. But I put my harness on and—very slowly—set up my anchor webbing around a large boulder. Using my rope, I measured the drop—nearly 100 feet to the talus below—too far to descend on a doubled over rope. I had wrapped a piece of tape at the mid-point of my rope to ascertain just such a fact, which elicited a big “hmm?” Not a big deal, but I had never rappelled off a single line—nor alone, nor on such a perpendicular cliff face. With the rappel device I had—an aluminum figure-8 descender attached to my harness—the rope winds through its upper loop, and the friction acts to control the descent. It's also used as a brake.

I secured the rope to my anchor and then fed it over the edge, its bright rattlesnake pattern dropping to the talus below. I wove the line through the descender and attached it to my harness. Above the figure-8, I formed a prusik knot on the rope. A short length of

webbing attached this to my harness. The prusik knot can slide up or down the rope, but can also lock if pulled from its side loop. It acts as a safety belay in case I become incapacitated, or otherwise lose control of the descender.

All hooked up, I stood for a moment gazing about—a breeze ruffling my hair, a buzzard gliding on a thermal perhaps—I don't remember much except dread. I had to get down somehow so that the webbing anchor and not the rope would be against the lip of rock. I got on my knees, not to pray, but to grab the anchor in my right fist and awkwardly back over the edge. A second of terror as I released my grip, and then the descender kicked in. I broke through to the other side—my fear turned to exhilaration. I kicked the rock face a few times as I dropped—my left hand on the downside of the rope, controlling my speed, and my right hand guiding the prusik knot so it wouldn't lock up. The rock wall fell back in an overhang, and I was surrounded by thin air. Then my right hand felt the prusik suddenly stop, and before I knew what happened my weight locked it tight. Twisting in a slow circle, I glanced up at the knot, stunned. What had just happened? I wondered if anybody was watching.

Although I had prepared for this situation in mock practice, this was the real deal, and it was unexpected. I carefully took my spare loop of rope and formed another prusik below the descender. Attaching a piece of webbing, I stepped into it and raised myself up. This took my weight off the other prusik so I could unlock it,

and when I did I discovered it had jammed against the little piece of tape. “Surprise, surprise,” as Gomer Pyle liked to say. I continued down to the talus, then rested my back against a boulder. Looking to my left, a praying mantis stared at me from a few feet away. His head was cocked to the side, like he couldn’t comprehend where this massive creature had come from. I scrambled down the talus past a few trees to the reservoir, and looked back up—the rope I would be ascending with my prusik knots looked like a thread. After another clumsy, nerve wracking encounter with the upper edge, I stood at the top again. I don’t exactly recall my emotions, but I’m sure I felt relief, and the glow of accomplishing something important.

The smooth face of rock above my rappel ledge is now covered with graffiti, and my climbing gear remains packed in a box under our stairs—the bright colors of the rope and webbing lying in darkness instead of sun, smelling of must. New people with no respect for nature have visited the heights, and I am older and less adventuresome. It is not the same—the mountain has changed, but I have changed more. Oh young people, relish the passion of youth. It is priceless.

For pictures, see the image gallery.