

“On Rappel!” -Scouting...

Taking Scouting Over the Edge

by Ron Currell

It's climbing day! Instructors and their assistants arrive early at Rattlesnake Point, in order to choose one of the better climbing sites. As soon as the gate opens at 8:00 am, they hit the ground running. Everyone helps haul the two already loaded garden carts .5 kilometres up to the cliff edge. For the next hour it's organized chaos as everyone is busy dropping ropes, setting up anchors and checking rope lengths.

By 9:00 am the troop arrives, eager and excited. After introductions of the instructors and assistants are made everyone puts on their safety equipment. Safety and participant responsibility is reviewed and stressed to all. Anchor systems are explained and a demonstration of rappel procedures is made. By 10:00 am, everyone is ready to go. The group is divided amongst the instructors, allowing more time to be spent in each activity.

The first group starts at the top of the cliff to practice rappelling. It is important that first time rappellers develop confidence right from the beginning. To this end, each new participant is “talked” down and allowed to take their time to descend. It is exciting to see how each participant builds confidence and speed with each subsequent descent they make.

Meanwhile, at the bottom of the rock face, the assistant instructors are busy preparing the second group to ascend. Stirrup and safety sling lengths are adjusted to the climber, belay ropes are tied on, and belay hardware readied. Mechanical ascenders are pushed up the hanging rope. Then it is time to ascend...first the right foot, then the left, all the way up to the top of the cliff. There the climber detaches the mechanical ascenders and is lowered to the ground by the belayer, in the same procedure that is used on climbing walls. With sufficient instruction participants can also try top-rope rock climbing on the training blocks.

After a break for lunch and a well deserved rest, the groups switch places and continue the exciting activities. By 3:00 everyone has had several opportunities to rappel and ascend. Although the youth want to continue and ask for “just one more time”, it is time to pack up and head for home. Everyone helps to pack the equipment and hike it out to the cars outside the gate. But before leaving the site, the youth receive their program crests and have an opportunity to say their thanks to the team for an exciting day and farewell to all until next time.

Ron Currell, Program Instructor for the “On Rappel!” - Scouting program takes “Scouting over the Edge” every year. Starting with his own Scout troop, 19th Oakville, and equipment borrowed from the Oakville Army Cadet Corps, Ron began to show youth “the ropes” of rappelling and climbing in the spring of 1996. After several more outings, his troop decided to make rappelling their troop specialty and submitted the requirements to their district office. They also challenged other area troops to try the adventure.

Ron was so impressed with the youths' enthusiasm for this activity; he became an Offer of Service at CJ'97, volunteering in the rappelling and wall climbing activity “Getting Up There”. After five days of assisting 3500 participants to make climbs and rappels, he saw what a success these activities were and was even more determined to bring it to Scouting members in a big way.



Photos courtesy of the “On Rappel!” - Scouting photo archive.

In the fall of 1997, Ron decided to deliver this program in a more structured way and drafted a rappelling program manual. The manual included introductions, objectives, safety responsibilities, personal safety equipment, equipment technique and signals for rappelling, ascending and rescue systems. This helped to formalize the program and was given to each instructor applicant when they joined the team. It was also given to the district and area Service teams so they were aware of all facets of the program. With no money available from troop or district funds to purchase equipment, Ron was so dedicated to making the program work he personally purchased enough equipment to take sections out.

The team ensures that each participant in the "On Rappel" – Scouting program is introduced to the equipment and techniques before they go out in the field, giving the basic instruction to the section in their own meeting place. In this manner the youth have an opportunity to get a taste of the excitement before going out in the field to implement their new skills.

To do this, a "dry training" is conducted by having a few of the youth talked through the procedures and techniques of rappelling with rope laid out on the floor. To demonstrate the ascent, a high, strong, tie on point is attached to a basketball net support frame and a rope thrown on it. Explanations of the equipment and techniques for ascending are made. Then, while one side of the hanging rope is held, a youth starts to climb the other, and as they get up a half metre the rope is let out a bit by the anchor person. These techniques can be practiced in safety. Ron and his team emphasize safety and ensure all participants understand the importance of using and looking after all the equipment.

Although Ron is the impetus behind "On Rappel" - Scouting, he wouldn't be able to continue the program without trained instructors and youth assistant instructors. For the youth assistants, this is an opportunity to learn new skills at the same time as they earn their community service hours for their high school diploma. Participating Scouters say the youth assistant instructors are the best part of the programme because their section youth can see what the Scouting program can lead them to. In fact, several of the past youth assistant instructors

On Rappel Continues to Grow

The "On Rappel" Scouting Program has recently been shifted from Burlington Area to the Central Escarpment Council. The council liaison for "On Rappel" is Bill Kowalchuk.

As of September 2006, Ron had three Instructors-in-training, John Wilkinson, Mike Wnek, and Kelly Kersey. John also acts as Program Coordinator for "On Rappel" (sort of like the Administrator for a group), while Ron continues to be Program Director (sort of like troop Scouter or section leader for "On Rappel"). For the 2007 spring program there were about ten youth instructors (some returning, some new).

This program is now offered to any troop that can travel to the Milton, Ontario area and has a two year waiting list! Scouts from as far away as Port Colborne and Windsor have had the "On Rappel!" - Scouting adventure.

Any Scouters interested in taking their troop or company on this adventure can call to book a date. The "On Rappel!" - Scouting adventure is operated April through November for a few days each month. A day outing or weekend camping trip is available as well.

For anyone interested in training to become an instructor in this program, contact Ron or John directly at: onrappel@burlingtonscouts.org

For more information on this adventure in Southern Ontario, log in to www.burlingtonscouts.org and click on "On Rappel!", or contact Ron Currell, Program Director with the Burlington Area Service Team; 905-257-0744 (7-9 pm only please).

See you out there!

have been hired as instructors at indoor climbing gyms and at Haliburton Scout Reserve.

The "On Rappel!" - Scouting program integrates many Scouting skills such as geology; nature studies; local history; knots; first aid; weather; and fieldcraft. As Ron says, "The Scouts learn important life skills needed for them to take on other challenges in their lives and become responsible adults." ^

– Ron Currell, Program Director for On Rappel! – Scouts enjoys sharing his love of climbing with youth.

