

ON THE ROCKS



If you are looking for a place to get away from it all yet stay in the city limits, the rocks of Skinner Butte Columns may be the place to go. Skinner Butte Columns present the novice as well as the advanced climber with challenges.

"There are lots of different columns and lots of different cracks," said Stu Rich, a semi-retired marketing professor at the University who has 25 years of mountaineering under his belt.

Located three blocks east of Delta Highway, the pillars of basalt, some towering as high as 40 feet, provide a practice area for climbers to prepare for such excursion as scaling Central Oregon's Smith Rocks, Rich said.

"Besides Boulder, Colo. it's the only natural climbing facility within a city limits," Rich said.

The easy accessibility is one of the major aspects which lure the climbers to the columns. "It's a good, safe, secure, exposed and accessible place," said eight year Albany climbing veteran Will Austin. "It's a great place to practice."

The area is not only a great place to brush up on mountaineering skills but also a great

place to start. A technique called bouldering is a good way to get a feel for rock climbing, said Andy Kim, a Eugene resident who was introduced to the sport three years ago.

Bouldering uses gymnastic moves around the rocks without the use of ropes at levels close to the ground, according to Rich.

Rich, who is the secretary and training director for the Eugene Mountain Rescue program, encourages beginners to enroll in climbing school courses either through Eugene Parks and Recreation or University PE classes.

"It's a good idea to learn the basics," Rich said.

Once a beginner feels comfortable, they may get a chance to "try someone's rope," Kim said. "It's a great way to meet other climbers."

A step up from bouldering is top roping. Top roping is the most frequent type of climbing on the columns, Rich said. Climbers scale the columns being protected by a rope attached to a chain and stake anchored at the top of the perspective column.

Conquering the columns without a top rope is also frequently done. A technique called lead climbing allows the climber to scale the rocks

with a protection rope trailing. The climber places safety devices into the cracks. The safety devices, called "protection," allow the climber to fall only twice the distance of the last piece of protection, Rich said.

A partner below the climber is able to catch the fall with the climber's rope. This practice, called belaying, is one of the most important methods a climber should know, Rich said.

Although a rope may run about \$150 and a harness about \$40, a good pair of boots is the most important piece of equipment for starting out. The boots, priced at around \$100, have friction rubber soles and pointed toes which enable the climber to get footholds in small cracks, according to Kim.

"Climbers need to be in top physical shape," Rich said. "Many people do it for a gymnastic type of workout."

"Strength helps, but technique takes you a long way," Kim said. "Gymnasts and ballerinas know how to use their feet well. You have to have good balance."

As hobbies go, "you don't have any lift fees, unlike skiing," Rich said.

Photos and
Story
By
Mark Ylen



Kevin Trexel (far left) cleans up Darren Stringer's protections after Stringer lead climbed a column at Skinner Butte. • Equipments most climbers use include a piece of protection called a figure eight and the pointed toed climbing boot. • Mary Austin nears the top of a column as her husband Will tends rope. • Stu Rich, a semi-retired marketing Professor has spent 25 of his 68 years mountaineering and rock climbing.



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