

# Forest Service employee offers lessons in tree climbing to public

By Meg Dedolph  
Oregon Daily Emerald

The secret to youth lies not in anti-aging creams or herbal supplements, but rather in climbing to the tops of old-growth trees, according to Ben Bochner.

"To me, tree climbing is just a way of staying a kid," said Bochner, who not only climbs trees to trim branches, but is now teaching others how to climb as well.

"It's just like that song (from Peter Pan,) '...If growing up means it would be beneath my dignity to climb a tree....'"

Bochner, who came from the Midwest and its deciduous forests with spreading low-limbed trees, thought Oregon's forests were nice when he first came here, but the trees were boring because they couldn't be climbed.

But once he found himself climbing trees to trim branches or to work for the Forest Service, he changed his mind.

"I found myself being up trees with a chain saw a lot, and asked myself what I really liked about this — it was being up in the canopy," he said.

He began advertising for tree climbing students around Christmas, and has taught more than 40 students since then.

"I thought that it was going to be mostly young people, rock climbers wanting to experience something new," he said, "but there were quite a few women, people over 50, students...they all love the woods, though."

One of the people who took climbing lessons from him, Zoe August, a research technician, called Bochner after she heard about him from a friend and then saw his advertisement in *Eugene Weekly*.

"It was really great," she said. "I love to climb trees, and I have not been able to climb to the top of a lot of trees because it's not really safe."

She said she liked climbing trees because it reminded her of skydiving.

"You're up in the air," August said, "but you're also connected with the earth. You're way, way up in the sky, it's really quiet, it's windy, it's peaceful and you get a view of the earth you don't get otherwise."

She said the hardest part was rappelling down the trunk, which required her to unhook herself from the tree.

"I was thinking that probably it wouldn't work, and I would die, but I had to do it anyway. The rappelling down was great — it was just like flying," August said.

Bochner said climbing old growth trees that often are more than 200 feet tall is a disorienting experience.

"It's kind of an ocean-like feeling because your tree is swaying and all the trees around you are swaying," he said. "You get pitch on you and the pitch smells great. To me, it smells like the bubble gum you get in packs of baseball cards. I'd come down all covered with that smell."

Still, tree climbing lessons make up only a small portion of Bochner's work. Mostly he trims branches or collects cones for the Forest Service, which harvests the seeds for reforestation.

"You go all the way to the top of the tree, walk out to the ends and pick the cones," he said. "Sugar pines have foot-long cones, and you have to go all the way to the end of the branch."

But even tree-trimming has its unusual moments, he said.

"I was trimming a willow tree, which was 80 to 90 feet tall, and about 60 feet across. As I was climbing up the tree, in all the crotches of the branches, I'd find turds, but I thought they were hairballs."

"I got up to the top of the tree, and there was a 20-pound raccoon looking at me, not scary, not vicious, just looking at me as if to say, 'What kind of animal is this?' In my mind's eye, I imagined him with his chin resting in his paw, looking at me, although he wasn't really like

that, he said.

"I set a rappel and got out of the tree, thinking it might be his tree and he didn't want me up there."

When he climbs trees, he and his students use one of two methods, Bochner said.

One involves the use of spurs on the feet, which are metal hooks that fit around the bottom of a boot and strap onto the calves.

"These are technological extensions that allow us to be like monkeys," he said.

Although the spurs leave small holes in the tree bark, Bochner said they don't damage most trees.

"I try not to climb the same tree twice because I don't want to mark it up," he said.

In combination with the spurs, he uses a specially designed harness for working in trees, and a thick manila rope, called a lanyard, that attaches to the harness on either side and encircles the tree.

A white mesh bag filled with coils of tree-climbing rope, which is different from other climbing ropes in that it doesn't stretch, rests on the ground. One end of the rope is attached to the harness.

Bochner leans back in his harness, so the lanyard is taut, and starts walking up the trunk, the spurs on his feet holding him in place. Once he has climbed a few feet, he leans into the trunk, standing straight against the tree, takes the lanyard, and moves it a few feet higher.

When he reaches the first branch, he leans into the tree, unhooks the lanyard, and holding on with his arm, rehooks the lanyard above the branch.

This maneuver, called a "limb over," is the first time a climber is completely unhooked from the tree.

"When I first started," he said, "and I got to a limb over, I had to psych myself up for 15 or 20 minutes before I could do it. I had to tell myself, 'If I get stung by a bee, if I have a heart attack,



Ben Bochner bounces his way back to the ground after climbing up the 80 ft. tree at the Masonic Cemetery early Saturday Morning.

if I have an epileptic fit or whatever, I'm not letting go of this branch."

When he reaches the top of the tree, where the branches are closer together he unhooks completely and starts "free climbing" through the tree.

In cases when he cannot climb using spurs, he uses a system of clamps and ropes where instead of climbing the trunk, he climbs ropes hanging over the tree's branches using ascenders, or hand-like clamps, and stirrups.

After reaching the top branches by climbing alongside the trunk, he climbs freely through the tree's upper branches.

To descend, Bochner rappels

down the tree, much like a rock climber rappels down a cliff.

"I feel safer in a tree than I do in a car. There's a feeling of rapport with trees because they're alive and I can feel their strength. I've never been into rock-climbing, and it's not the height. I think it's because trees are alive."

Ultimately, Bochner hopes not to make money from teaching tree climbing, but to encourage people to preserve the trees.

"I do it because I like turning people on to it. The more people that you get out to the forest and climb a tree, the more people there are to preserve the trees," he said.



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