

THE ART OF DISCOVERING WINTER PROTECTION

By Jack Roberts 11/15/2008

In many of my clinics I have climbers tell me that they find winter alpine routes very “heady” and difficult to protect. That climbs which in summer time can be easily protected are often entirely unprotectable when the snow flies and the water melts on and in cracks and renders the climbing too run-out for them.

Climbers often stay off these “unprotected” routes because they don’t want to chance a fall and get hurt. What’s interesting and funny is that with a bit more gear, a lot more patience and some humility, protection can always be located and found to be bombproof.

Finding gear can often be an art but not one that is unobtainable for most people. It is often just taking the time to look about, scrape off the snow, break away the ice-choked cracks and to be disciplined enough to take the time you need BEFORE you need it to place bombproof gear whenever and wherever you find it. Having the creativity and a good assortment of different tools (pitons of varying sizes, nuts, hexes, etc) that can be hammered can make all the difference between finding good gear or finding none at all.

The following are **SIX** ways you can make a difference in your protection placements.

1. **LOOK BEYOND THE OBVIOUS AT BELAYS**

your most important pieces of gear you place will be used to anchor the belay. Compromise your safety here and kiss your butt goodbye. When you arrive at the end of the pitch and you see a bunch of old webbing and rusty pins don’t just assume that it’s all good and clip into it before testing the strength of the pins and webbing. If it doesn’t seem good you can do some of the following:

- ◆ If you have long ropes (70meters) you can climb up a little further and find a better belay stance. The cracks above the old belay might be better suited to accept gear and you’ll be safer.
- ◆ Look at your rack and place as much gear as you think you need to keep it safe. If the old tattered belay looks bad just back it all up if you can.
- ◆ Clip temporality into the fixed gear but scrape away old ice, snow, dirt etc in cracks and find better placements.

2. **EVALUATE FIXED GEAR**

When you come across fixed gear don’t just clip into it and go, assuming that just because it’s there it must be totally good. Freeze and thaw conditions loosen up old pitons and nuts. Clip into it and then look around for a way to back it up to make it even safer. Visually check it by looking for cracks in the piton’s eye, frayed wires, tap old fixed nuts to seat them better, tap pitons to drive them in further, tap every damn thing you can to make your life better.!

Isn’t that part of winter climbing? To hit things?

3. **LOOK BEYOND YOUR IMMEDIATE AREA/NEEDS**

Many climbers have a tendency to only look for cracks at head height, moving on when nothing is found. Or looking only straight ahead or straight down. The experienced winter climber always looks to either side to better identify areas where gear can be placed. Ideally you will have multiple single and double-length runners to minimize rope drag and be climbing with double or twin ropes to keep rope drag to a minimum and provide more stretch into the system, making it safer than if only a single rope were used.

You will soon learn how to read the rocky terrain and identify where cracks might just appear. Always keep looking for an opportunity to place gear.

4. DON'T LET TIME SLOW YOU DOWN.

Winter days are short and the nights are long and cold so concern about how slow you are moving is something that will always be pressing on your mind.

However, don't try and rush things in order to get up the pitch more quickly.

Take the time you need to place good gear that you have confidence in. If you place mostly mediocre pieces you will move slowly because you don't trust them to hold. Get into the habit of always looking for gear, quickly figure out what and where pro will go, place it and then move on to the next placement. Save the extra time you MIGHT have for those pieces that are tricky and hard to find.

It may mean you will place more gear more frequently than in other, more summer conditions but become adept as placing good gear quickly and moving along efficiently.

5. DON'T LET TIME MAKE YOU RECKLESS

Keep your climbing movements intentional and direct. Make every move a deliberate one. In that way you will be building confidence that you know you are in control and will not fall off. Just because you are running out of light does not mean that you should not move deliberately and in full control. Making one sketchy move to another sketchy move is a recipe for falling and for an epic to follow. Keep your movement steady and in control at all times. Stick to this formula and you will be moving along quickly without realizing it.

6. DON'T EVER STOP LOOKING

No matter how hopeless things seem to get, there will always be something you can do; you just haven't found it yet. Keep traversing, digging, gardening, hitting things and praying and soon you will find the perfect piece of pro that will keep you from dying.

HAPPY HUNTING!!