Descending After the Climb

Descending from a climb requires knowledge, skill and experiences. What types of hazards can you run into? What is the BARKS check system? How do you backup rappelling? These questions are often overlooked and many climbers have experience some sort of epic while trying to descend after a climb. Prepare yourself with some simple tips and skills that can make rappelling safer. This article will present a system for checking rappel rigs, steps for setting up rappels for normal and extended rappel devices, and point out situations to watch out for by giving some personal experiences.

The descent usually has two options: walking off or rappelling, and sometimes a little of both. Walking off is usually preferred to rappelling, but may require some advance techniques, such as short roping and short pitching. Short roping is the act of protecting the group by using natural terrain features to safe guard a slip. It is used in 3rd or 4th class terrain. Many recreational climbers move through this terrain un-roped, but in Yosemite, deaths in forth class terrain are as frequent as fifth class terrain. If you plan to venture into remote climbing areas, such as the amphitheater in Linville or western mountains, get some training in short roping techniques.

The other option is rappelling. Rappelling is the act of lowering oneself using a rope. The equipment needed is the same as belaying and works essentially as a self-belay. The set up should have the rope running through an anchor and then through your belay device with both ends of the rope touching the ground, or to the next rappel station.

Rappelling can be one of the most dangerous times in the climbing day. Rappelling accidents tend to be unforgiving, so it is important to be vigilant while rappelling. Before rappelling I always run through BARKS.

1. **B**uckle – Is it triple pass and doubled back?
2. **A**nchor - Is it secured? Did you check the slings for cuts?
3. **R**appel device – Is it set up properly? Is there anything that can get caught such as hair, or clothes?
4. **K**not – Are all knots secured? Is there 18” of tail on the Patagonia knot and was it pulled tested?
5. **S**afety – Are there knots on the ends of the rope? Is there an autoblock back up? Is the rope touching the ground?

Buckle - Check the buckle on your harness. It may seem unnecessary, but there have been cases of climbers launching themselves on rappel only to have the harness come undone because the buckle was not doubled back. This usually occurs because the climber relieved himself before rappelling. Check the buckle.

Anchor **-** Check the anchor. I have seen people unknowingly rappel off slings at a rappel station that was over 75% cut through. Check the webbing for cuts or loose knots, and when in doubt back it up. On remote climbs, I carry a 10-foot piece of webbing tied into an over the shoulder 4-5 foot sling. This can serve me on the climb, and when needed be used to backup or replace rappel stations. My chalk bag belt is a 5 to 6 foot section of 7mm cord for the same reason.

Rappel device - Check to see if it is threaded correctly, is the carabineer locked, is the spine on the brake strand side, and is the belay device on the correct rope. A friend of mine rappelled off the end of a rope due to threading the wrong rope. It was a 40 section of haul line not he rappel line. A back up saved his life.

Knot - For some rappels, it will be necessary to tie two ropes together. The knot of choice is the Patagonia knot. This is a simple inline overhand knot. Tests show that this knot is stronger inline than the inline figure 8 and will lie flat on the rock to reduce the chance of snags while retrieving the ropes. Place the two strands together and tie an overhand knot 18" from the end of the ropes. Pull the strands apart to set the knot. Tie a second overhand directly after the first. Whatever knot you use, make sure it is tied correctly.

Safety - I recommend always using one or more safety backups while rappelling. Remember once you commit to the rappel it is extremely difficult to change the set up if it is not working. Many accidents in rappelling are due to the person loosing control. This can happen in new situations. For example, steeper terrain, thinner ropes, wet ropes, extra weight from gear, tangled ropes, or an unfamiliar rappel device can all result in conditions causing a potentially dangerous situation. Climbers should be able to adapt to changing or novel conditions. The first time you rappel on overhanging terrain with a pack, you may have a rude awakening. I have seen a climber flipped upside down by a pack, a device unclip from the harness, and a climber loose control from the additional weight of extra gear. All of this occurred because the climbers had never been in the situation before and was unprepared for the novel conditions. Safety backup include the following:

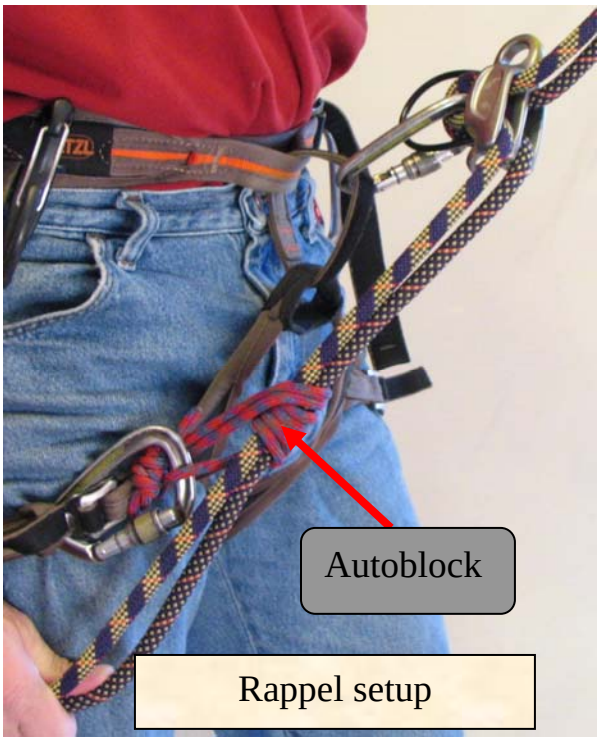
1. knots on the end of the rope
2. autoblock attached below the rappel device
3. fireman's belay from below

4. belaying from above on a second line.
5. using two carabiners in the rappel device on steep terrain

In addition to rappel backups, climbers need to be aware of rappel hazards because of the terrain. Flakes and cracks can get a rope jammed so tight that it is impossible to retrieve. I have rescued many parties who have had their ropes become stuck. Be sure when rappelling past flakes or objects that you move to the side that prevents the rope from being entrapped. Using a rope that is too short can be dangerous. Some rappels require two ropes that are 60m. If you are unsure how far the rappel is use a belayed rappel to safeguard the first person down. This will also eliminate the need to toss the second rope for a double rope rappel. Tossing ropes takes some practice and can present hazard for others. Always yell “rope” before tossing the rope. I witnessed climber toss a rope without yelling and hit another climber on lead. Objects such as rocks and debris can be dislodged by tossing ropes and pulling ropes after the rappel. Give others the courtesy of an advanced warning, yell “rope”. Additionally, never rappel below a stuck rope. The first person down should always use an autoblock backup so they can go hands free allowing them to stop and free stuck ropes. Once the first person is down, he or she should give a fireman’s belay to the others in the party. When doing multiple rappels, tie a double fisherman knot in both strands to prevent from rappelling off the end of the ropes. Be sure to untie these knots before you pull the rope. Otherwise, the knot will jam at the upper anchor and become stuck. Finally, watch out for clothes or hair that can become stuck in the rappel device. Vertical rappels are notorious for pulling clothes and hair into the device and getting the rappeller stuck. A friend of mine once got her hair caught because the wind blew her pony tail around.

A final note, rappelling can dangerous if the necessary precautions are not taken for the given situation. Each situation is different and may require different set ups. For example, on slabs, it is helpful to extend the rappel device using a sling, but this can cause problems on overhanging rappels. Get training if any of this seems unfamiliar, before you go rappelling.

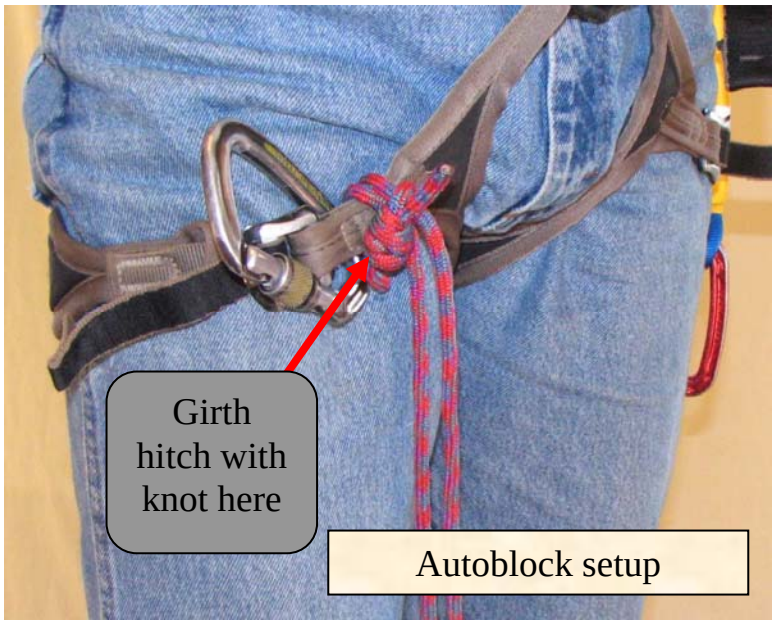
Rappel Set up



Rappel setup

In steep terrain, it will be easier to manage with the belay device clipped directly to the belay loop. An extended set up will place the belay device in your face, which may get awkward. The set up is the same as belaying. Keep the spine of the carabiner on the brake side, the brake strand coming out of the bottom of the belay device and lock the carabiner. You will want to add an autoblock back up when rappelling. Girth hitch a prussic to the leg loop, not the riser. Keep the double-fisherman knot against the leg loop. Add a carabiner to the leg loop, wrap the brake strands of the rope three times with the prussic and clip the loop into the carabiner. BE SURE that the prussic is not too long otherwise; it can jam against the belay device. It will not lock up if this happens.

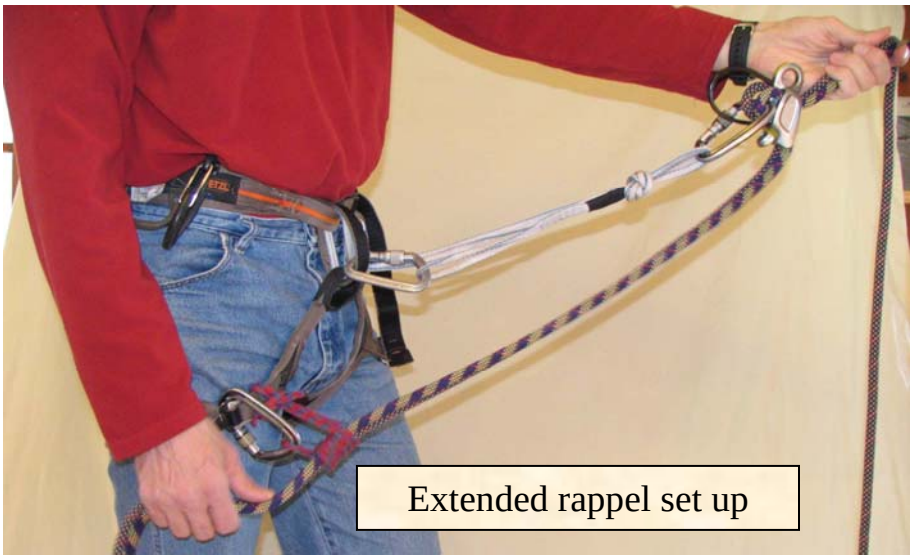
A prussic is a loop of 5 mm cord tied with a grapevine knot, which are two double-fisherman knots. Select a cord length of approximately 40" to make the prussic. This length will need to be customized for you. Some harnesses have longer or shorter rises and it is important that the prussic is NOT TOO LONG.



Autoblock setup

For convenience, girth-hitch the prussic around the leg loop so that the grapevine knot is against the leg loop. This keeps it out of the way when making the autoblock.

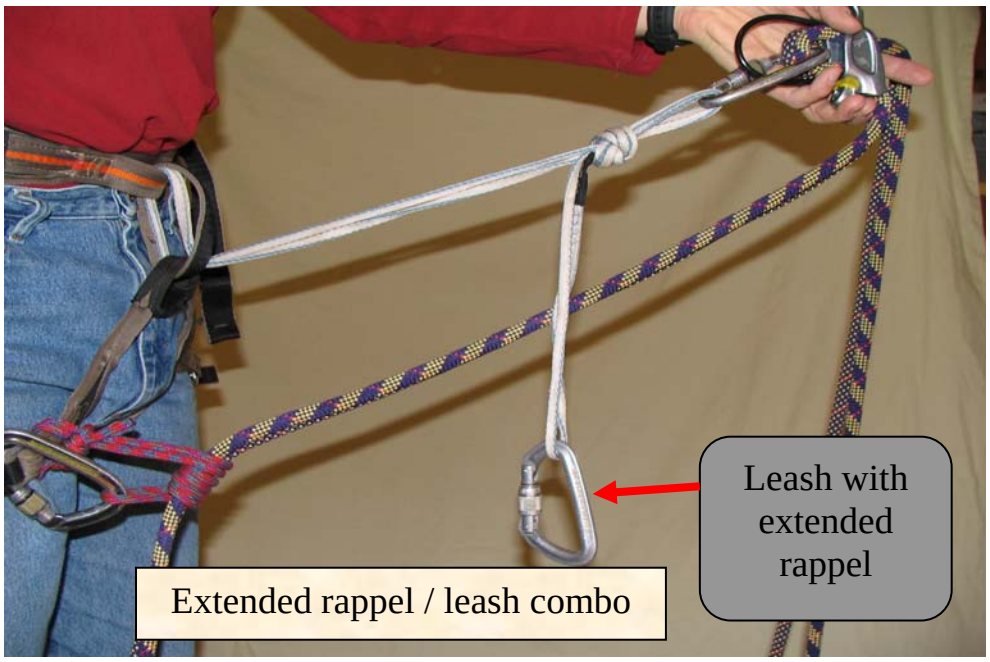
Extended rappel


Extended rappel set up

You can create an extended rappel setup with a 4-foot sling. This has several advantages. First, you are less likely to get cloths or hair caught in the device. Second, you have a leash to clip into the next anchor when making multiple rappels. Third, the extension gives you freedom of movement. Many people dislike using the extension citing a lack of redundancy. You can create redundancy by using a 4-foot sling.

Steps

1. Girth-hitch a 4-foot sling through the capture points on the waist belt and leg loops.
2. Clip a locking carabiner into the loop
3. Fold the sling in half and clip the carabiner to the belay loop
4. Pull out on the sling and tie an overhand knot creating a double loop
5. Clip the belay device into both strands of the overhand loop.



Extended rappel / leash combo

When you reach the next anchor, unclip the locking carabiner from the belay loop and clip it into the anchor. Now you can take yourself off rappel. By having the carabiner clipped to the belay loop, you have redundancy;

two strand going to the belay device, and two loops for the belay device.

Patagonia Knot

Tying two ropes together will allow for longer rappels, in many places, this is required. The best knot is the Patagonia knot. It resists rolling, lays flat on the rock, which reduces snags, and is easy to untie after weighting. It is a knot that absolutely must be tie correctly.

Steps

1. 18" from the ends of the ropes, tie an overhand knot using both strands. *Cinch down*
2. Pull the ropes apart by separating the strands. Do this on both sides of the knot. *Cinch down*
3. Tie a second inline overhand knot butting tightly against the first knot. *Cinch down*.

Make sure to have 18-inch tails on this knot and go through all the steps completely. Neatness counts with this knot eliminate any crossing of the strands. This knot must be tied accurately and precisely.

With proper skills, techniques and experiences, getting down from the climb will just add to the fun. Always be vigilant and check everything using BARKS.