Dangerous Creatures

The 2016 accident report from the American Alpine Club reveals that humans are not the only creatures that cause trouble in the mountains. In three separate incidents, climbers were attacked by bats, wasps, and a grizzly bear. The bats were sharing a difficult route in Smith Rock State Park, Oregon, with a climber whom they bit. The victim did not fall but later underwent a full prophylactic treatment for rabies. The wasps were swarming on a popular climb in New York's Shawangunks. A leader took a fall trying to avoid them. Note that one of the climbing routes in that area is called "Wasp."

The bear was preparing to hibernate and did not wish to be disturbed. It was late November in Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada, when two descending climbers intruded on its territory. The bear bit one of them on the leg and chased both of them. In these episodes, humans and wildlife survived.

A final cautionary note from the American Alpine Club's reports last year: If any climber has long hair, do not let it become caught in the rappel device. This happened to a young woman in Colorado. She was rescued unharmed.

—Steven Jervis
Alpina Editor

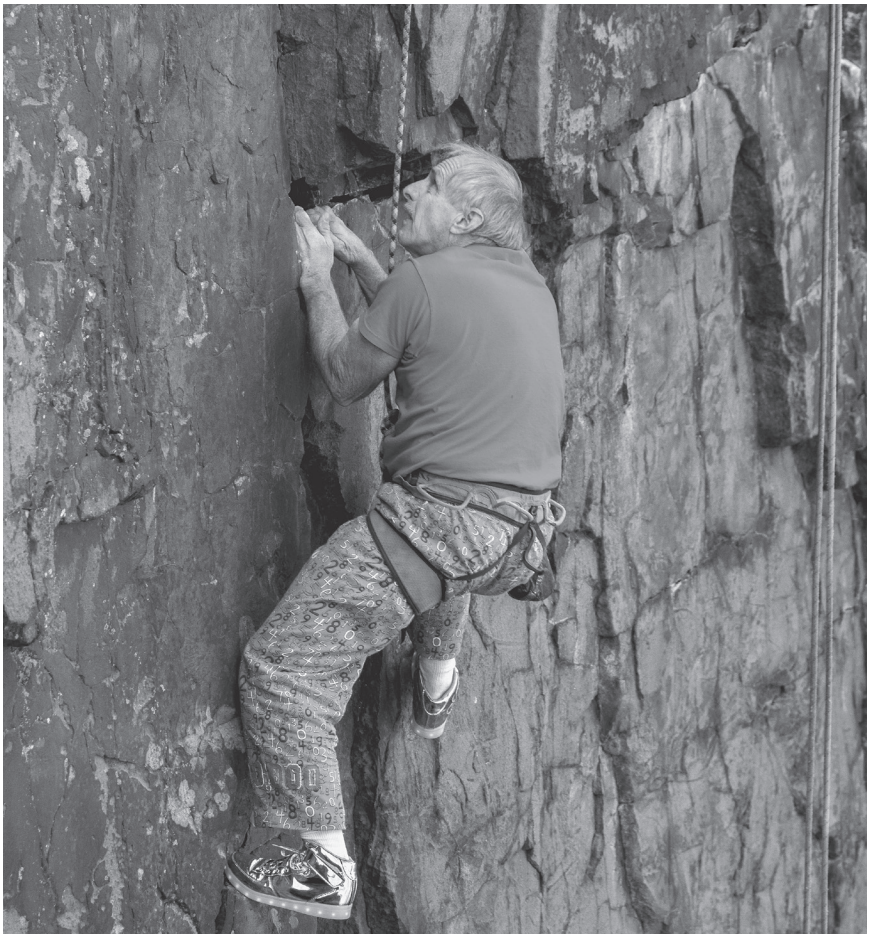
Sources include *Alpinist*, the *American Alpine Journal*, *Rock and Ice*, and the *Washington Post*.

The Man Who Climbed 100,000 Climbs

On April 30, 2016, the 67-year-old American rock climber Ken Nichols made his 100,000th lifetime ascent. Nichols, a Connecticut native, led a climb called "Subline" at Connecticut's Ragged Mountain for his milestone ascent. According to Nichols, Subline—a 5.10d[1] test piece put up by the one-and-only "Hot" Henry Barber—"is a really sustained 5.10. It's got great protection. A classic, beautiful line. It follows this thin crack up past a few corners."

One hundred thousand is a number that doesn't normally get mentioned in sports unless it is in reference to record-setting crowds at a college football game or the amount of money the richest professional baseball players earn per game. So if for no other reason than this, Nichols's feat is noteworthy. But to put Nichols's accomplishment in perspective, consider the following: If a person climbed an average of one route every single day of his or her life, it

1. Very difficult by the standards of the Yosemite Decimal System.



Ken Nichols top-roping "Unconquerable Crack" on Ragged Mountain in gold-colored, flashing-light sneakers (non-climbing shoes) he was given as a gift on the day of his 100,000th ascent. CHRIS GESEK

would take close to 274 years to reach 100,000 ascents. Nichols managed to do it in just over 45 years of climbing.

In those 45 years, Nichols maintained meticulous route logs of all his free ascents. His own definition of a free ascent is any climb completed entirely under his own power, whether led, top-roped, or free-soloed. Thus, his 100,000 ascents include many top-rope ascents, in addition to the dizzying number of leads. "I keep a hand-printed diary," he says. "Notebooks, 6 by 9 inches, 200 pages long. I write down the climbing area, the date, who I climbed with, what routes I did, details. Anything interesting really." In recent years, he has

input all of this information into a spreadsheet to track his climbing with even more precision and sophistication. And in the figures distilled from this data, Nichols's 100,000 ascents become even more staggering.

As of March 29, 2017, Nichols had made 103,320 lifetime ascents. He averaged 2,225.86 ascents per year from 1972 through 2016, but his most productive year didn't come until recently, in 2014, when he said he climbed 7,600 pitches, or an average of 36.53 each day. Before logging his 100,000th climb, Nichols made news in 2012 for completing his 10,000th ascent of a notoriously difficult 5.11 in Connecticut called "Dol Guldur." On the mountainproject.com page for Dol Guldur, one poster notes, "Ken's 10,000 ascents . . . equal approximately 162.9 miles with an overhang of 7.6 miles."

On a fact sheet he maintains, Nichols also keeps track of some more idiosyncratic and risqué personal records. For example, his hardest ever send (a successful climb without falling or hanging on gear) was "Zabba," a 5.13-; his longest streak of consecutive climbing days came in 1986 through 1987, when he climbed 654 straight days; his hardest free solo is a 5.11- called "High Fidelity"; the hardest route he has ever led barefoot was "Kansas City," a 5.12; and the hardest route he has ever led stark-naked—sans harness and shoes as well—is "Mind Bender," a 5.9.

Even though all of these statistics and factoids are impressive, there is an obsessive-compulsive quality latent in all of Nichols's climbing and record keeping. Nichols recognizes that "other people find it impressive or downright ridiculous," but explains his efforts by saying, "I just find the big numbers interesting. If you don't set goals, you just sit around shooting the breeze." But even with this explanation, there is something undeniably quixotic about his *ad nauseam* repetition of individual routes and his ruthless pursuit of large numbers for seemingly little reason other than to attain them. This singular commitment to goals and ideals—things Nichols himself is quick to acknowledge are intrinsic to his playing of the "numbers game," as he puts it—is also responsible for behavior that has made him one of the most infamous and contentious figures in American rock climbing during the past three decades.

Nichols began his climbing career at the auspicious moment when the free-climbing revolution—the collective move away from pitons and aid climbing—was really kicking into gear. "I really started climbing in April 1972, when I was 24 years old," he says. "I pounded some pitons into the rock and tried to do some aid routes in the late '60s, but I don't really count that." Although he never became a rock superstar like some of his peers, he has

climbed with the best of them: "I climbed one day with Henry Barber once and I've climbed with a number of other well-known climbers over the years. I climbed with [Jon] Krakauer, and Fritz Wiessner, Royal Robbins, and Lynn Hill a couple times."

During the 1970s, Nichols came to identify very strongly with the free-climbing ethos espoused in its purest form. Since before the advent of sport climbing, bolts and fixed protection have been a heated topic for debate in the climbing community. The emergence of sport climbing only intensified divisions, and in the decades since, there have been regional "bolt wars" nearly anywhere climbing can be found in the United States. Purists who believed that traditional climbing—employing cams, nuts, and other manner of "clean" protection—was the only acceptable form of climbing (whether for aesthetic, stylistic, environmental, or other reasons) would go out and chop bolts from existing climbs. Nichols was one of the staunchest opponents of fixed gear and earned a reputation as perhaps the most fanatical chopper in the country.

Nichols's philosophy on fixed gear and bolts is fairly simple: "The goal was, especially in the '70s, to leave routes clean and leave no trace that you were there. And then this bolting thing began. And to me, that's aid climbing. My theory is that if you cannot lead the route from the ground up, and place all the pieces, it's not a free ascent. And if you can't lead it cleanly without damaging the rock, then top-rope it." His strict adherence to these ideas forced him to improvise outlandish, daring, and complex systems by which to protect climbs that he wanted to lead free but that lacked places for conventional protection. He bagged a collection of first ascents on near-featureless faces using tied-off hooks, like those used on tenuous aid pitches, which were then tensioned to points on the ground. Despite Nichols's claim in his book *Hooked on Ragged: Rock Climbing at Ragged Mountain* (Sweet Printing Company, 1997) that many of his "hook routes have excellent protection with bombproof hooks, the word 'bombproof' being defined as able to hold the worst possible fall," the climbs see few repeats.

His ideas, though pretty far to one end of the spectrum, are not all that radical. And the motivations behind them—to protect the rock as much as possible and encourage fair play—are laudable. But the extreme measures to which he resorted when enforcing theses ideas and imposing them on the greater climbing community—that is where it gets more complicated.

For years, climbers would come upon mangled bolts at cliffs all across Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. Nichols was more often

than not the culprit. In 1991, *Climbing* magazine quoted Nichols saying, "Once I chop a route, it will remain chopped, no matter how many times I have to return to keep it that way. Until the bolting stops, apparently the cliffs will have to be destroyed in order to save them." He bristled at criticism from the climbing community about his tactics. In a section titled, "Whiners and Complainers," in the front matter of his Connecticut guidebook *Hooked on Ragged*, Nichols writes, "We all know who these pathetic people are. They're the parasites of the climbing world, those who have nothing good to say about anybody or anything and nothing constructive to offer anyone. . . . They complain about the lack of fixed protection and top-rope anchors because it's too 'inconvenient' to use clean-climbing gear. . . . They're the first to blame their problems on others and the last to take responsibility for themselves. **Ignore them.**" (The boldface is his.)

Climbers throughout the region took continually greater issue with Nichols's behavior over the years. In addition to preventing the development of sport climbs (or even traditional climbs, with the lone bolt or two to make them safer), Nichols's independently enforced embargo on fixed gear put at least one climber in grave danger. Halfway up what he knew to be a classic sport pitch, this climber found that the bolts had been rendered unusable and was forced to complete the climb without protection. Nichols's bolt chopping had thus evolved from mere nuisance to serious safety concern.

Many famous crags in the Northeast, from Ragged Mountain in Connecticut, to Farley Ledge in Massachusetts, to Rumney in New Hampshire, found themselves the victims of Nichols's uncompromising methods. But eventually his vigilantism caught up with him. Climbers in Massachusetts managed to catch Nichols in the act of chopping bolts at Farley Ledge in 2007. He was charged with and convicted of willful destruction of property in a Massachusetts court. In addition to a $250 fine, Nichols was banned from some of his most beloved climbing areas as part of the court's decision.

These days, despite Nichols's past efforts, the Northeast has a dynamic and growing sport climbing community. Many young Yankee climbers are blissfully ignorant that there was ever any conflict or controversy concerning the bolts they clip. Even revered climbing areas with strict traditional ethics, such as Cathedral and Whitehorse ledges in New Hampshire, have more than their fair share of bolts. Ragged Mountain and the nearby Connecticut crags are the last enclaves where Nichols's ideals remain the law of the land. Even at a place like Farley Ledge, where bolts abound, there are still vestiges and reminders of Nichols's chopping sprees. One is liable to find the stray

disfigured bolt hanger. The climb on which Nichols was finally witnessed chopping bolts, once known as "Mass Production," is today known (at least familiarly) as "Caught in the Act."

Bereft of the sense of purpose that crusading against fixed gear no doubt gave him, Nichols has chased his records and amassed ascents with great zeal similar to the conviction with which he previously chopped bolt after bolt.

On the day of his 100,000th ascent, a crowd of Nichols's friends and admirers watched at the crag. One friend captured the moment with a handheld camcorder from the top of the cliff. At the base, a toddler teetered around. If you didn't already know who Nichols was, you might easily mistake him for a grandfather come to watch his grandkids play among the boulders. Dressed in a pair of stop-sign-red pajama pants and a blue T-shirt, Nichols chatted with everyone, eagerly offered information to first-time crag visitors, and genuinely looked as if there was no place he'd rather be.

Nichols's 100,000 lifetime ascents are likely a world record for no other reason than that few climbers have climbed so often and kept such exhaustive records. There's no denying that his personal climbing achievements are impressive and humbling. And, despite his destructive streak, he has pioneered thousands of routes during his climbing career that climbers still follow. For some, his unorthodox views and his vandalism are impossible to overlook. In short, Nichols is a complicated character. But at the bottom of his entire career, from his immense list of climbs to his bolt chopping, there lies a lifelong passion for climbing rivaled by very few. Asked if he has any further goals, Nichols says: "Actually I don't. Other than individual routes. Some of my favorite routes. But I have no major goals. But that's no reason to stop. I just like climbing, ya know?"

—Michael Levy

Michael Levy is a 2012 graduate of Williams College who guided climbs in Vietnam and China for two years. He has also worked for a Boston technology startup. He lives now in Colorado, where he freelances for climbing magazines.