

Life at the top

Vicki Mayes reports from a tree climbing and aerial rescue course



I arrive 15 minutes late as usual, a whirlwind of excuses and nervous blabbering! Greeted by a grand smile and booming welcome, Steve our Geordie instructor directs me into the wood shed to where the other aspiring tree-climbers are waiting. I'm introduced to strapping teenage Michael and the two Hughs, who were unimpressed by my apparently unoriginal "Who's Hugh?" Younger Hugh was built like a bull, hands in his jean pockets and cool as a cucumber and older Hugh was small, monkey-like and excitable. Once I'd finished flapping, we filled out many forms and got down to business. Each was designated a bag of gear, harness, helmet, slings, carabiners, 60 metre rope and various ascenders. We run through the equipment checks, then straight onto the essential tree climbing knots.

"Done!", I exclaim, feeling very pleased with myself while the lads are still faffing with their first bowline.

"You've done that before", Steve asks suspiciously.

"Yeah... I'm a climbing instructor", I confess. It soon becomes obvious that I have a big advantage over the guys! We head out to find some trees, two towering oaks, and Steve demonstrates his essential tree-climber throwing skills to get the rope into the tree. And that's where my stereotypical girly weakness is revealed and I get frustrated that I can't throw as high as the rest of the lads! But no matter, as I can climb twice as fast! I quickly master the body-thrusting technique to ascend the trunk, then, after straddling the first branch, a combination of route-planning and flexibility get me into the canopy. Meanwhile Hugh's jeans seem to be restricting him somewhat! The branches become thinner and thinner and I start to question their safety! Then a gust of wind sends my branch rocking and I let out a squeal!

"And that's the difference between climbing



rock and climbing trees," Steve hollers at me. "Trees move!".

Day 1 quickly highlighted the qualities required for a career in tree-climbing: confidence at height, agility, route-planning and rope-work skills. It quickly separated the women from the boys!

Day 2 and 3 involved more rope-throwing, thrusting and tree-climbing. Our next skill to learn was the branch walking. The idea being to have two anchor points strategically placed in the tree top that allows you to travel along the branch by releasing tension in one rope and taking in slack on the other, or, in arborist terms, "milking the cow!".

Day 4 focussed on rescues, coming up with various chainsaw-related scenarios involving severed ears and toes and we were able to utilise our award-winning acting skills.

On day 5, we learned to pole-climb with huge spikes strapped to the insides of our boots. This involved stomping up the tree, while hitching the wire safety rope upwards as you go. When I questioned Steve about the consequences of your spikes slipping, his reply was: "You get punched in the face by the tree!" So slipping was out of the question.

Being a passionate traditional climber I found the skills required for tree-climbing very similar and instantly loved it. However, the systems used are very different from rock-climbing or rope access. They seem to favour practicality over absolute safety. This took some getting used to, but once I learned to trust their systems, it felt much more natural and my animal instinct kicked in!

Some people say our species was born to run, but before that, were we also born to climb,

when we foraged for food in the trees and found refuge from our predators in the forest canopy? It's strange that an activity that was in the past key to our survival as a species has almost been completely forgotten. And how odd it would be to see a group of grown men out climbing trees after work instead of playing football! But after five days of training with Steve, our experienced and knowledgeable instructor, I was amazed by how quickly I felt at home high up in the arms of a giant oak tree. I would recommend this course to anyone who is considering a career in arboriculture, or even if you feel like trying some tree-climbing. It may be a lost art...

Vicki Mayes, is 27 years old and from Glasgow. She received an Education Fund grant in June 2013 and completed a tree climbing and aerial rescue course at Barony College in Dumfries in October. She has been a passionate rock climber from a young age, and her dream is to be a tree surveyor and to own a small forest in the Scottish highlands.

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The Education Fund makes awards of up to £750 to individual Confor members for technical and professional courses such as chainsaw competency, but also for educational trips and activities (eg attending conferences). This award is not open to corporate members. The Provident Fund is available in cases of hardship, such as through long term illness, death or injury. For details, refer to the membership section at www.confor.org.uk (about us).

Studying public perceptions of woodlands

Researchers at the University of Cumbria, in collaboration with Hill Top Partnerships, have been studying public perceptions of woodland cover in the Lake District National Park.

Around 600 people have taken part in a survey to determine their views on levels of woodland in the Borrowdale Valley. They were asked questions about photographs which had been digitally altered to show differing levels of tree cover in the valley. When asked to identify the current reality, 80% of the respondents chose a photograph showing considerably less woodland

cover than exists at the moment. But when they were then asked to choose their 'most desirable' future view, 69% chose photos showing more woodland than the current situation.

This research explores ways of determining perceptions of the optimum level of acceptable woodland, without spoiling the character of the landscape. However, farmers, land managers, foresters and the general public are all likely to have different views about what this level should be.

Dr Andrew Weatherall, lecturer and researcher at the National School of Forestry, based at

the University of Cumbria in Ambleside explains: "It is notable that, in this survey, 48% of the respondents chose the photo showing the most abundant amount of woodland of all as their most desirable option."

"As well as being visually desirable, woodlands are a great way of combatting climate change; they capture carbon in the growing trees and store it in biomass and soil."

Full analysis of the data is currently being undertaken and funding is being sought to extend the study to other landscapes in the UK.