

# CLIMBING THE RIVER BLUFFS

By Pamela Eyden

Climbing is one of the fastest-growing sports in the country. Climbing walls have popped up in schools, recreational centers and shopping malls from Maine to Baja, and climbing will become a competitive Olympic event at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. No wonder climbers are surveying the bluffs on the Upper Mississippi River for good climbing crags.

Red Wing, Minn.; Maiden Rock, Wis.; Alma, Wis.; Winona, Minn.; La Crosse, Wis.; Lansing, Iowa; and Savanna, Ill. are just a few of the river towns with bluffs that have attracted teenagers, hikers, lovers and daredevils over the years who climb with no forethought, equipment or understanding of the rock beneath their feet. Fire fighters, paramedics and police officers know these places, too.

Climbers who know what they're doing say their sport is not like these

risky, impromptu scrambles. It's more methodical and safe. It offers physical and mental challenges, and great views of the river valley. It's a way to exercise outdoors and a way for people to con-

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nect with each other and with the land. Families can learn to climb together.

The Olympic board added sport climbing to the Olympics to appeal to a young audience. Young people

are attracted to climbing in increasing numbers, but with some physical fitness and training, people of all ages can do it.

Patrick Menton, assistant recreation director at Winona's Park and Recreation Department, took his nine-year-old son and his friends to an indoor climbing gym for a birthday party. It had multiple routes and an auto-belay mechanism. He was amazed at how fearlessly the kids took to it, agile enough to find the right holds and keep climbing up and up and up. Then they'd lean out and let go, trusting the belay mechanism to catch them as they dropped. Adults are more aware of how high they've climbed and more cautious.

Menton had a different experience the first time he climbed Winona's Sugar Loaf peak.

“The route to the top is more



Above: The city of Winona, Minn., installed new bolts for sport climbing on its Sugar Loaf peak, which makes this "at your own risk" activity safer. (Cynthia Porter, courtesy of Visit Winona)

Opposite: A climber makes his way up Barn Bluff in Red Wing, Minn. (Craig Huang)

difficult, but the beginners route hangs out over the north face of the peak, which goes all the way down ... forever!" he recalled. "I looked down and saw a hawk flying below me. It was kind of nerve wracking."

This is where practice in climbing gyms and controlled breathing techniques come in handy, he said. Heights and unfamiliar challenges can catch anyone by surprise. Climbers learn how to press on.

"Climbing changed my life," said Eric Barnard, climbing advocate and director of the Outdoor Education and Recreation Center at Winona State

University. "After my first climb, I said, 'This is what I want to do every day.' It gave me focus and clarity and challenge. There's nothing like it.

"It teaches mental fortitude and how to solve problems. On big climbs, 60 percent of the climbers fail to reach the top. You just come back and try it again."

Once a year, Barnard heads west to climb Yosemite's El Capitan and the desert spires of Canyonlands, Utah, using traditional climbing techniques. He is also teaching his three sons to sport-climb.

"When they get to be five years old,

we put on helmets and safety equipment and climb up Sugar Loaf," Barnard said.

In "traditional climbing," climbers carry all the gear they need to keep from falling and place it in the rock as they go up, then remove it as they come down. This takes a lot of skill, technique and about \$2,000 in equipment, not including rubber shoes and other personal gear.

In "sport climbing," which got its start in the 1980s, the climber climbs with a rope tied to his or her harness, and follows a defined route, clipping into pre-fixed bolts to protect against falling. The investment here is just a couple of carabiners and about 10 quickdraws, which allow fast easy connection to a bolt. Sport climbing has opened the sport to many people who wouldn't have time, fortitude or money for traditional climbing.

Experts advise beginners to first go to a climbing gym to learn climbing techniques, and build strength and coordination. Then find or hire a certified instructor to help them "learn the ropes" and make a safe transition to outside climbing. (Contact your state or local climbing association.)

Rock in the Upper Mississippi River bluffs is ideal for sport climbing. The bluffs are formed of Cambrian sandstone capped with Prairie du Chien dolomitic limestone. Sandstone crumbles and falls away, but the limestone is climbable.

"The sandstone is impossible," Barnard said. "Actually, there's only a handful of places in the river valley where the climbing is great. But even so, it could be the best sport-climbing spot in the Midwest, if it's developed right."

However, climbers are welcome only at certain river bluff parks.

## Interstate State Park

Interstate Park straddles the St. Croix River, with bluffs of hard gray basalt. There are 17 rock climbing areas, ranging from easy climbs for beginners and kids through routes rated as high as 5.13 on the Yosemite Decimal Rating System (YDRS), set up in the 1950s by the Sierra Club.

At Interstate, it's all traditional climbing — there are no fixed bolts.



Youngsters exult in climbing Sugar Loaf, the tallest peak around. (Eric Barnard)

In the YDRS, Class 1 is walking on an established trail, and Class 5 is technical climbing. In Class 5 there are further distinctions: A rating of 5.6 would be steep and vertical with good hand and foot holds; 5.9 would be slightly overhung, and anything above 5.10 is for serious climbers, requiring skill at overhangs, small holds, delicate footwork, strength and practice.

(Numbers in the system are counted so that 5.9 is followed by 5.10, and 5.1 is less than 5.10.)

### Barn Bluff

Red Wing's 43-acre Barn Bluff Park has more than 100 climbing routes of varying difficulty that ascend a

350-foot cliff. There are both mixed and traditional routes, ranging in difficulty from 5.6 to 5.14, on the YDRS. The view from the top is spectacular. If you're more of a "Class 1" climber, there's a walking trail to the top, too.

People have been climbing Barn Bluff for decades. For a long time it was the only Mississippi River bluff that attracted climbers.

### Sugar Loaf

Winona's Sugar Loaf now draws a regional crowd of climbers, thanks in part to word of mouth and social media. This 80-foot dolomite peak is all that is left of the original massive rock face that was quarried in the

1800s into stone blocks and city sidewalks. The city tried for years to keep people off the peak, to no avail, since it's right in town and there are three colleges nearby.

Before the city sanctioned climbing, it asked the League of Minnesota Cities to review the idea. The League's opinion was that rock climbing and ice climbing are not "stunting activities." The state of Minnesota's recreational immunity laws say that climbers who climb on their own assume the risk. They can't sue the city for injuries, unless there's some negligence involved. However, the city cannot lead groups or rent equipment to climbers.

The city then hired Barnard and another local climber to make sure the routes were safe, install bolts for sport climbing and remove old hardware from the peak.

This winter, the city opened another area of the bluffs overlooking the city to ice climbing, which is like climbing up a frozen waterfall. It requires more skill and equipment.

"People have been calling from all over and asking, 'How do I get there? How can I do that?' I tell them, 'You don't, unless you're already an ice climber and you have your own equipment,'" said Menton.

### Mississippi River Palisades State Park

Upriver of Savanna, Palisades Park allows rock climbing at two areas. (A third area was closed when a rock fall blocked the trail.) It's all traditional climbing, and no bolting is allowed. Although climbers have used the park for many years, park manager Jay Notrott said he doesn't see a lot of people, partly because the climbing areas are off the trail and not visible.

### Other Bluffs

La Crosse's Grandad Bluff is another prominent bluff. Judging from climbers' blogs online, many have climbed it, but it's off-limits to climbers, said Steve Carlyon, director of La Crosse's Park, Recreation and Forestry Department.

"The fire department doesn't want to encourage climbers, because they've had to rescue so many people who have fallen and died over the years," said Carlyon.

## Tools of the sport



New, longer stainless steel bolts (left) are glued into the rock. They won't rust, unlike bolts put in decades ago (right), which are shorter. (Eric Barnard)



*Sentinel Rock is a favorite climb at Mississippi River Palisades Park, outside Savanna, Ill., where a local group pitches in to do trail maintenance and advocates opening more areas to climbing. (Matt Grosvenor)*

La Crosse, too, is a college town. Carlyon said the city would be willing to consider the idea, if it got a proposal.

### *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*

Experienced climbers might locate a promising bluff and climb it using traditional climbing skills. Landowners may not even know they're there.

That's the way it was in the old days — "Don't ask, don't tell." Climbers wanted to avoid confronting wary property owners and being turned away. Land owners, like a lot of us, assume that rock climbing on the bluffs is dangerous. They have to be shown otherwise, which is part of the mission of the Minnesota Climbing Association.

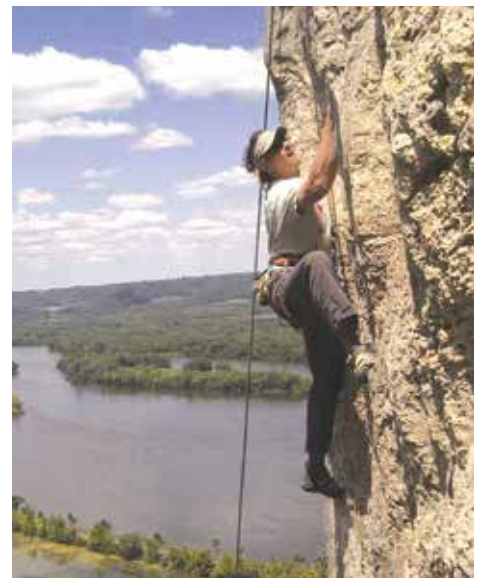
Barnard and James Loveridge, president of the association, are working with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to open up John Latsch State Park, 10 miles upstream of Winona, to climbing.

The fabled dolomite promontories there — Faith, Hope and Charity — served as landmarks for riverboat pilots on the Upper Mississippi.

Climbers have their eyes on other nearby bluffs as well. One that Barnard calls French Crag, near La Moille, Minn., is on state forest land. Another, near Fountain City, Wis., is a 200-foot cliff with a giant cave, on private land. The land is scheduled to be surveyed this spring, paid for by the Minnesota Climbing Association.

Arranging legitimate access for climbers can take a long time, but there are precedents. When a popular climbing area near Sandstone, Minn., went up for sale, possibly threatening access, the MCA worked cooperatively with the DNR, the city of Sandstone and the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota to purchase it. Then it transferred the land to Banning State Park.

"Climbers are great stewards of



*Eric Barnard uses traditional climbing techniques on French Crag near La Moille, Minn. (Eric Barnard)*

the land. We have to fight so hard for access, we are passionate protectors," said Barnard. 🏞️ 🧗

***Pamela Eyden is Big River's news and photo editor.***