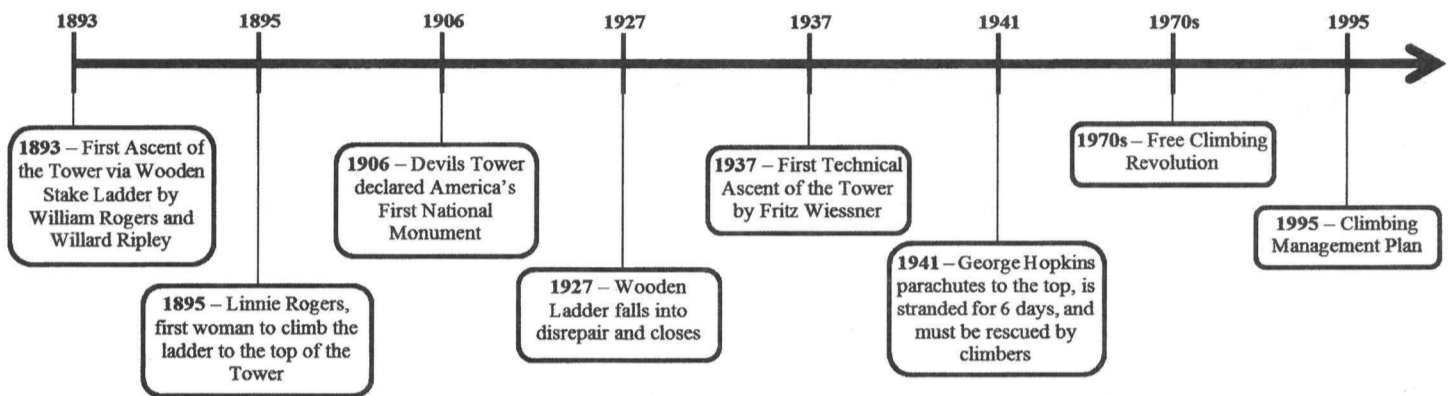




How Do Climbers Get Up There?

For over a hundred years, climbers have tested their skills on the vertical faces of Devils Tower. Using specialized techniques and equipment, climbers have inched their way up - and down - the steep walls. Hundreds of parallel cracks divide the Tower into large hexagonal columns. These features make it one of the finest traditional crack climbing areas in North America. The cracks vary in length and width: some are wide enough to fit your entire body, others barely have room for your fingers; the longest crack extends nearly 400 feet upwards. As you gaze at the Tower, you will likely see climbers clinging to the precipitous rock.

Climbing History



Early Climbing Stories

In 1875, geologist Henry Newton recorded the first detailed description of Devils Tower as “inaccessible to anything without wings.” It was not long before someone challenged that description. William Rogers and Willard Ripley, two local ranchers, were determined to climb Devils Tower!

The men built a 350-foot wooden ladder into one of the Tower’s cracks. They hammered stakes into the crack and connected them with wooden boards. On July 4, 1893, about eight hundred spectators watched as William Rogers ascended the ladder. Upon reaching the summit, he raised an American flag up a flagpole, likely brought up the day before. Devils Tower had officially been climbed!

Others quickly followed in Ripley’s and Rogers’ footsteps. On July 4, 1895, William’s wife, Linnie Rogers, became the first woman to climb the ladder to the top of the Tower. The last time the stake ladder was used was in

1927. Portions of the ladder can still be seen today from the south side of the Tower Trail.

The first technical rock climb of the Tower occurred in 1937. Fritz Wiessner, Lawrence Coveney and William House summited in 4 hours and 46 minutes, a respectable time even by today’s standards. Jack Durrance pioneered the classic and easiest route to the summit the following year. Today, the Durrance route sees about a thousand ascents per year.

In 1941, as a publicity stunt, George Hopkins parachuted onto the summit of Devils Tower. Unfortunately, his plans for an easy descent did not work. Living off of air-dropped supplies, Hopkins awaited rescue. After six days a climbing party was assembled and successfully brought Hopkins down. He remains the only person ever to reach the top of the Tower without climbing.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long does it take? The average summit climb is 4-6 hours. This varies based on route, group size, and climber skill.

What is it like on top? The summit is just over one acre in size. It is slightly domed and rocky with native grass, cacti and sagebrush.

How tall is the Tower? The Tower is 867 feet tall. Most climbs are about 450 vertical feet.

What side do they climb? There are over 220 routes, and all sides have been climbed.

Is there a climbing speed record? In the 1980s, Todd Skinner free-soloed (without ropes or protection) a route in 18 minutes.

Has anyone ever been killed? From 1937 to 2017, there have been six climbing fatalities.

Does climbing damage the rock? Aside from bolted anchors used for belaying and rappelling, there is no permanent damage to the rock. Modern safety equipment is designed to be efficient, removable and non-damaging.

Can climbers spend the night up there? Park regulations prohibit camping on the Tower.

Who can climb/Is there an age limit? There are no restrictions based on age or skill. All climbers are required to register. The youngest recorded climber was six years old, and the oldest was ninety-one.

Styles of Climbing

Free Climbing

Climbers who use their hands and feet to grasp, pinch, pull or jam natural features of the rock such as edges and cracks to gain upward motion in vertical terrain. Ropes and equipment are only used as safety precautions –to protect against injury during falls. A climber is tied into a rope that is connected to their partner, who is ready to catch the climber if he/she falls. The partner uses a technique called belaying with a specialized friction device designed to catch falls.

Free Soloing

No equipment beyond shoes and chalk protect a climber who is free soloing. These climbers are alone and do not use a rope or a harness at all during their climb. A fall can result in death.

Aid Climbing

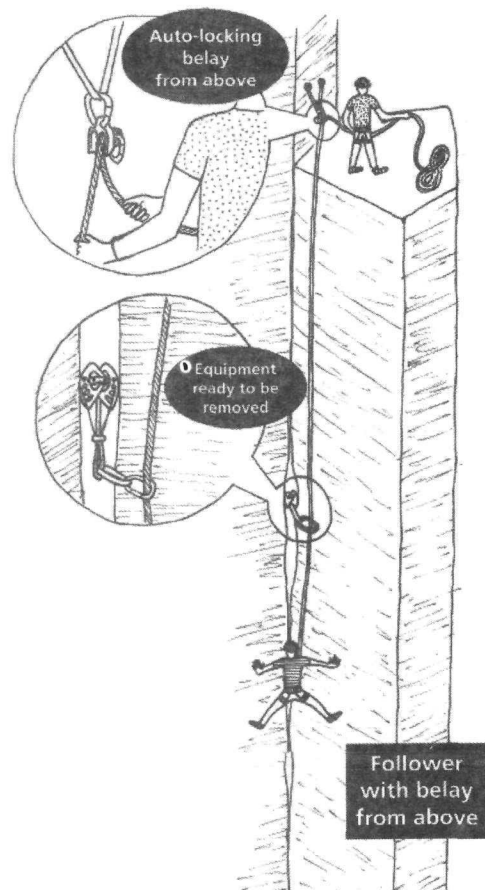
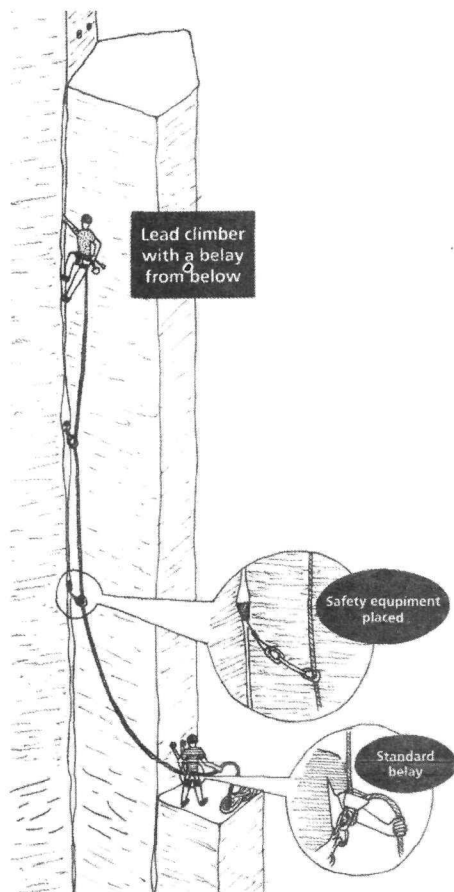
Climbers who rely on their equipment to gain upward motion. This style uses fabric ladders attached to gear such as pitons or bolts placed in the rock.

On The Way Up

Climbers usually climb in groups of two or more. The leader ascends the rock first. Their partner, who is anchored to the wall, belays them; feeding out the rope and catching them with the rope should they fall. When the leader reaches the end of the rope, they secure themselves to the rock and belay their partner up. The second climber then climbs, taking out whatever gear has been placed into the cracks.

Getting Back Down

Climbers must rappel or abseil to descend the Tower via a standard rappel route on the Tower. These have fixed anchors so climbers do not leave any of their own equipment behind. The rope is threaded through the bolts to the halfway point, making two equal lengths. They attach the rope to a friction device and feed rope through the device to descend the Tower. This device allows them to control the rate of their descent. After each rappel one side of the rope is pulled to remove it from the bolts above.



Climbing Gear

- **Climbing shoes** – they are very tight fitting and have a special “sticky” rubber sole to help them gain a foothold on the rock
- **Climbing Chalk** – keeps fingers and hands from perspiring while climbing onto small holds (similar to gymnastic chalk)
- **Harness** – holds all the equipment and provides attachment points between the climber and the rope or rock
- **Rope** – 200-240 foot (60-70 meter) long nylon-covered rope with a braided protective sheath is what modern rock climbers use to ascend and descend the tower
- **Traditional “Trad” Gear** – chocks (tapered metal wedges) and spring loaded camming devices (“cams”) are placed into cracks and clipped into the rope to provide protection for climbers

Climbing Management

In the 1970s there was an explosion of innovation and popularity in rock climbing as a sport. New technology included the modern climbing shoe and spring loaded camming devices (“cams”) that made climbing safer and faster. At the Tower, the number of climbers increased from around 200 in 1970 to almost 5,000 climbers in 1990.

The Climbing Management Plan (CMP) was developed in 1995 to address this increasingly popular activity and its impacts on the Tower. Essential components of the plan include:

- Climbers are required to register before and after their climb.
- No new fixed anchors are allowed to be placed on the Tower.
- A mandatory falcon nesting closure on a specific side of the Tower during spring of each year.

- A voluntary closure on any travel within the Tower Trail during the month of June. This closure acknowledges the spiritual and cultural significance of the Tower to American Indians.

The CMP seeks a balance between the Tower as a cultural resource as well as a natural and recreational resource. As such, the plan was developed with input from the NPS, climbing community and American Indian tribes. The voluntary June closure was agreed upon and endorsed by these stakeholders.