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ROPEMAN 3
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The Ropeman is dead – long live the Ropeman.

Steve Long, Technical Officer at Mountain Leader Training UK and president of the UIAA's Training Standards Working Group, reviews the latest incarnation of Wild Country's multi-talented ascender.

I still vividly remember my first ever attendance at an annual outdoor trade show; it must have been about 1995 and I was an instructor proudly representing Plas y Brenin. My first port of call was to get some information about ropes for the mountaineering instructor training department. At that time Ron Fawcett was representing Marlow; Ron was probably still the best climber in the world, but less talented as a salesman.

“So what are the new developments in rope technology?” asked the wide-eyed climbing instructor. “Well Steve,” Ron replied. “You know a rope's just a rope when all's said and done”.

Ron's supervisor hurried over. “I'll handle this one, Ron.”

The highlight of that trade show without a doubt was the new Ropeman device from Wild Country. A tiny no-frills clamp, it was light enough to be carried as part of an Alpine rack yet highly effective for improvised hoists and self-rescue. We soon found that it could also be used as a pulley clutch as well, limited by the strength of the cam pin but adequate for sack hauling. It's about the only piece of gear that can't be shoved into a crack and clipped into that's worth its weight on a climb.

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Years later Petzl brought out the Tibloc; a fraction of the weight but also less versatile. Could the Ropeman be bettered? The Ropeman mark 2 arrived a couple of years later and featured a stainless steel cam with spiky teeth to replace the original alloy version, which had grooved teeth more prone to wearing. As well as a longer lifespan the new version extended the range of compatible ropes from 10-11mm to 8-11mm, but at a cost of an extra 23 grams: an increase in weight of almost one third from the original's weight of 62 grams.

Over the years I've used both devices in many different circumstances, both for teaching and personal adventures. The original version has remained my favourite, partly because I've not needed the additional capacity range (and the version 1 works reasonably well on thinner ropes in any case) and also because it's easier to slide back down the rope after loading (more useful than you might think). But both versions have some significant limitations, in particular the fiddly requirement of slipping a rope between the rotating cheeks and then clipping the karabiner back into the hole.

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It's not for nothing that the instructions recommend keeping the karabiner clipped to its leash – otherwise there would be any number of these gadgets littering the base of crevasses – indeed there probably are anyway. But this adds a new limitation: leaving the leash clipped to the karabiner makes it harder to release the pulley (so I would recommend using a separate karabiner for the leash).



Now along comes the version 3. Is it a significant step forward? I would say most definitively yes! The new Ropeman's streamlined case hides notable design improvements under the surface. Pulling the case open and rotating the case reveals an encased hole for the karabiner, meaning that the rope is gripped purely within the unit itself, rather than by squeezing it against the krab as with the previous incarnations. This not only makes it much easier to fit onto the rope but it also reduces friction significantly in use, making it much easier to slide the device up the rope.

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The instructions enclosed with the device recommend using with rope diameters of 9-11mm (as printed on the main body), but since the Ropeman 3 is also designed to work with tape slings its hard to see any reason why it shouldn't work perfectly well with smaller diameter ropes as well; it seems to grip pretty well even on prusiks – worth some scientific tests I think for strength and grip, as the manufacturer will doubtless and quite rightly have based the recommendations on the side of caution. (Mountaineering activities require reasonable knowledge about manufacturer's recommendations, but a willingness to improvise when things get tough. And lightweight gadgets like this are definitely carried with improvisation in mind). Tape slings? Well, this means that a “cows-tail” sling hitched onto a harness can be easily adjusted to tension a belay and minimise the likelihood of shock loading the sling. Or of course you could climb up a sling if you were so inclined!

The version 3 Ropeman is closer in weight to the original Ropeman (8 grams heavier), but far more versatile. The ridged teeth are considerably less incised than the version 1 and I suspect that this new version will erode faster than the previous versions (the instructions specifically recommend a visual inspection to check that a groove hasn't formed in the cam. However, given that my original device is still showing no significant signs of wear after moderate use for well over a decade, I doubt whether this will present much of a problem for most users, though perhaps the grip on muddy ropes will be reduced compared to the earlier versions. The axle strength is rated at 15KN, so this should be perfectly adequate for sack hauling, though I would still recommend a dedicated device such as the Pro-traxion if you are intending to haul on big walls.

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Summary

The instruction sheet provided with the Ropeman gives specifications and usage advice mainly in pictorial form and as with the previous versions requires some careful scrutiny to decipher. All Ropeman versions have a swaged wire loop fixed to the cam wheel – this has a double function of reducing the risk of dropping the device if you fumble when attaching it to a rope (much less likely with version 3!) but also for pulling the cam open to release the device and allow it to slide down the rope (Version 2 is difficult to slide down a rope). I would recommend using a separate karabiner for this loop, so that this release facility is easy to use.

In conclusion the Ropeman 3 is an excellent addition to the range, and certainly the version that I would carry by choice from now on.

The RRP of the Ropeman 3 is £44.95 and there's a set available at £54.95, which comes with a Synergy Lite HMS biner.

Steve Long (51) is an International Mountain Guide currently working as part-time Technical Officer at Mountain Leader Training UK and also serving as the president of the UIAA's Training Standards Working Group. He is a founding member of the Association of Mountaineering Instructors, and worked at Plas y Brenin as a senior instructor for 12 years. He is the author of the popular instructional DVD Self-Rescue for Climbers and also the definitive text for mountain leaders: Hillwalking, as well as various other projects such as the current Tremadog guidebook.

Steve is a keen and active climber, equally at home on rock or ice; and has visited every continent for mountaineering activities. Climbing highlights include one of the few British ascents of Cerro Torre, several routes on the Troll Wall, canyoning and big walling in Borneo (Low's Gully), a winter ascent of the Dru's French Direct and various other big walls; the most recent being the Fish route on the Marmolada.