Mountain School Tech Tips:
Scrambling Safety

Over the weekend of September 6, 2008, I found myself, along with 10 other people, on the scramble route up Gimli Peak. Now, it's at least 15 years since I've scrambled to the summit of Gimli Peak, and I'd either forgotten, or avoided, the steep, loose gullies we found ourselves going up. As chunks of rock loosed by scramblers above catapulted down, I started to think about "scrambling safety."

First off, what exactly is scrambling. The best definition I could find for scrambling is the one used by *The Mountaineers*, who describe scrambling as "off-trail trips, often on snow or rock, with a 'non-technical' summit as a destination. A non-technical summit is one that is reached without the need for certain types of climbing equipment (body harness, rope, protection hardware, etc)."

I couldn't find any comprehensive statistics on the number of accidents that occur while scrambling in Canada, but I suspect most of us can easily think of friends and companions who've had some kind of scrambling injury. Certainly, I'm aware of a number of accidents that occurred to KMC members in the last two years while scrambling on some of the local peaks.

So, what can we do to improve our safety while scrambling in the mountains? Well, here in some semblance of chronological order – from pre-trip planning to the return trip down the mountain, are some suggestions.

1. *Make a thorough pre-trip plan*. First, find out everything you can about the route(s). Check local guidebooks or www.bivouac.com for route information, study the map, check Google Earth, talk to people who've climbed the route. Once you've got a good idea what the route entails make some pre-trip decisions such as, how many people should be on this route at one time (more people = more hazard), what equipment might you need (stiff soled boots or ice axes for snow, helmets for loose rock), what time of day (or night) should you start out to ensure you get off the peak before dark, or before the inevitable summer afternoon thunderstorms hit? What is your absolute latest turn-around time? What safety equipment do you need and what can be shared among the group?
2. *Travel expediently*: Travel at a steady but consistent pace. Keep your stops short, and be efficient with them. If it's time for a snack try and stop in a location where you can study the route ahead while you snack. That's two stops for the time of one.
3. *Keep the group together*. This one floats to the top of every accident review I've ever seen. Make it a priority to stick together, unless your group has clearly discussed and settled on a strategy to break into smaller groups.
4. *Employ appropriate safety gear.* An ice axe strapped to the back of your back is little help when you start to slide down an icy snow slope, the same goes for a helmet stored safely in your pack. Get your gear out and use it when appropriate.
5. *Manage your group for rockfall.* Scrambling routes by nature tend to ascend weaknesses on mountains, and this often means going up loose, chossy

gullies. Not only is there a lot of loose rock lying around to get knocked down the mountain, but it's all funneled down on top of whichever unfortunate scrambler happens to be below. There are two strategies to manage loose rock in gullies. One is to ascend (or descend) the gully one person at a time with all the other party members out of the way. The other is to keep people close together in the gully so that falling rocks don't have a chance to reach warp speed before hitting the unfortunate below. Obviously, option one will only work for short sections of the route. If you've got a 100 metre gully to ascend it's going to take way too long to go up one person at a time (slow parties are their own hazard). If your ascent (descent) route is an open loose rocky slope, you can employ a third strategy, which is to spread people horizontally across the slope so that no-one is scrambling below anyone else.

6. *Don't go up what you can't get down.* Scrambling up is almost inevitably easier than down-climbing. If you're not sure you can climb down, don't go up in the first place.
7. *Stick to your turn around time.* Turning around before making the summit sucks, but not half as much as an unplanned bivouac on a small ledge on a cold night when it's starting to snow.
8. *Use as much care on the descent as you did on the ascent.* Experienced mountaineers know that the climb ain't over when you get to the top. Fatigue, encroaching darkness, and “back to the barn syndrome” can all lead to more accidents on the way down as our attention wanders from the task at hand. Keep it together until you get back to the car.