

Tech Tip - Aid - Hooking

By Mark Synnott

Illustration by Mike Clelland

Anyone who's done much hooking can tell you that there's something undeniably special about hanging from a fingernail-sized piece of chrome-moly steel. Whether you've done it once or a thousand times, the thrill's the same.

Not every edge, flake, or hole is the same, so you'll want a variety of hooks for most. A standard hook rack looks like this:

1 Cliffhanger

1 Hawk (see illustration)

2 Talons

1 medium-sized hook (e.g., the Black Diamond Grapping or the Pika Ibis)

1 extra-big hook (e.g., the Fish Captain Hook)

This basic setup will get you up almost anything. You often encounter similar moves back to back, so double-up on commonly used hooks. The Black Diamond Talons have three different hooks built into the same tripod-style tool, so having two of them on your rack essentially gives you doubles on three small hooks.

Racking. Sort your hooks into two similar groups and carry them on two biners on your bandolier. Never carry all your hooks on one biner: If you drop it you'll be up a creek.

Carry hooks towards the back of your gear sling since they have a bad tendency to get tangled with the rest of your rack.

When you begin hooking, clip one biner full of hooks to each aider for the duration of the hooking section. This minimizes clipping and unclipping, reduces your chance of dropping a hook, and enables you to move efficiently from one move to the next.

Happy hooking. Before you start a hooking section, obtain the best protection possible before you go. Next, stand up high in your aiders and inspect any likely edges within reach. Determine which hook best fits your edge of choice. You'll want to use the best hook placement possible, even if it's low. It's much better to do three short, solid moves than one dicey one.

Avoid sloping or flat placements in favor of incut features. Small flakes usually have very positive edges for hooking, but use them with caution as they can break. On most well-traveled granite routes, you'll encounter obvious gouges in the rock where hook placements have been either intentionally enhanced or simply gouged out by repeated use. Standard practice is to lay your hook on a likely edge, then slide it horizontally until it drops into the approved divot.

Bat hooking. Bat-hook holes — shallow, drilled holes that can be hooked — are common substitutes for dowels or rivets on big-wall climbs. Many a climber has done a super-sketchy aid move only to later notice that he's bypassed a bat hook. Keep your eyes peeled for these tiny holes, especially in places that otherwise look completely blank. Look where you think you'd drill — that's where you'll usually find them. Talons work well for most bat-hook holes.

Stepping up. Do not bounce test hook placements! Apply too much force and a hook can bend open or the rock will snap. Carefully and gradually shift your weight onto the hook. It's OK to look at the hook as you test it, but safety glasses are a good call in case it blows. If the hook hasn't blown after 10 seconds, I give it a



Treading lightly, testing thoroughly.

slight spring with my foot. Finally, I'll push my body against the rock in an effort to make the hook pivot a bit before I fully commit. I'm now trying to see just what the hook can handle. Remember, when moving from one hook to another, keep some weight on the lower hook until you're ready to commit to the new placement. If you completely unweight a hook, it may fall off whether you're ready or not.

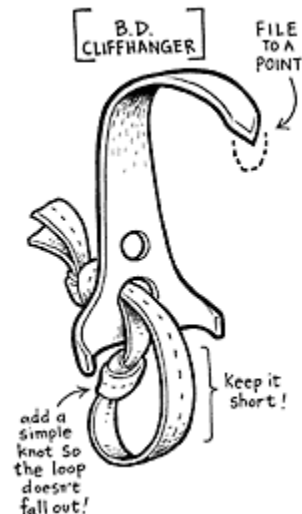
Metal shop. Standard Cliffhangers often are the best tools for hooking fragile flakes, but a "pointed" version will bite better in small dimples. You can simply file the end of the Cliffhanger to a point — the standard pointed hook — or you can take off a full centimeter of metal to change the geometry of the hook before making the point, creating the "Hawk," one of my favorite hooks. I use a grinding wheel, taking great care to work slowly, constantly cooling the hook in ice water so I don't ruin the temper of the metal. I've found the Hawk to be the most useful hook on my rack.

Ramping up. Eventually you may find that you enjoy hooking so much that you want to try a really hard route like *Wyoming Sheep Ranch* or *Plastic Surgery Disaster*. Here's a sample hook rack for a hard Yosemite route:

- 2 Talons
- 2 Cliffhangers (one pointed)
- 2 Hawks
- 2 Leeper-Logan pointed-tip hooks
- 2 Leeper flat-tip hooks
- 2 medium-sized hooks
- 2 large hooks

Many of the hardest hook moves involve long reaches between placements. I like to wear a free-climbing boot, just in case I want to have one foot in a ladder and the other on the rock. I also carry a chalk bag so I can hold onto thin edges for steep top-stepping.

Many famous hooking testpieces are no "harder" than easy hook routes, just much more sustained, with greatly elevated consequences. The main challenge of hard hooking is keeping your cool. Thoroughly testing each hook move helps to keep the mind from coming unhinged. If you get too strung out, remember that down-hooking or lowering off hooks is possible.



The Hawk, an easily crafted modification.