GEAR REVIEW - WEBBING LADDER.

Chris Curtis.

Many years ago, before the days of SRT, wire ladders were the only real way to get down and up a pitch (Photo 1, 2). Over time rope manufacturing techniques improved and new types of ascenders and descenders came about and SRT became the new way up and down. Ladders still have a place in caves though, but for the big vertical pitches SRT is now the way to go.

The problem with wire ladders is their weight and packing space. They are heavy and bulky in a pack. They do however still serve a good purpose and eliminate the need for SRT gear if there are only a couple of small drops/climbs in a cave.

At a recent Wombeyan Caves trip, I had the opportunity to test an Aspiring four metre webbing sling ladder (Photo 3) of Vince's. I was very surprised by the design and I was quite excited to test it out.

First Impressions: I was very surprised that a four metre ladder fit in a small bag. Being made from tape sling material, it compressed easily so there wasn't much air space left in a bag.

It was very light. So light that it would hardly be noticeable in a back pack. Another advantage to being light weight is when travelling overseas by plane. A super light ladder is ideal for places like New Zealand. A wire ladder uses up a lot of a baggage allowance, but a webbing ladder hardly uses any of it.

Test At Wombeyan: During our weekend at Wombeyan, it didn't take us long to find a small vertical cave to test the ladder in. Wombeyan is known for having caves that only require a small ladder to access. So, it's the perfect place to test it out.

I rigged the ladder and I went down first to see what problems I would encounter. As I suspected, the rungs are more difficult to get your feet into. One reason is because the ladder doesn't have much weight to it to pull it tight. The other problem is the rungs are also made from webbing material. Although it was more difficult to climb down, it didn't take long to adjust my technique and I was down in no time.

Climbing up however was much easier, still not quite as easy as a wire ladder, but still easy.

When pulling the ladder up, you really notice how easy it is being so light. It was up in a few seconds and stored away in a small bag. It doesn't get stuck between rocks and doesn't damage rocks.

Photo 1: Ladder pitch in Niggle Cave, Camooweal, Queensland.
Photo: *Ross Ellis,* 1970.

Photo 2: Ladder pitch in to Markham Cave, Chillagoe, Queensland.
Photo: *Ross Ellis,* 1966.

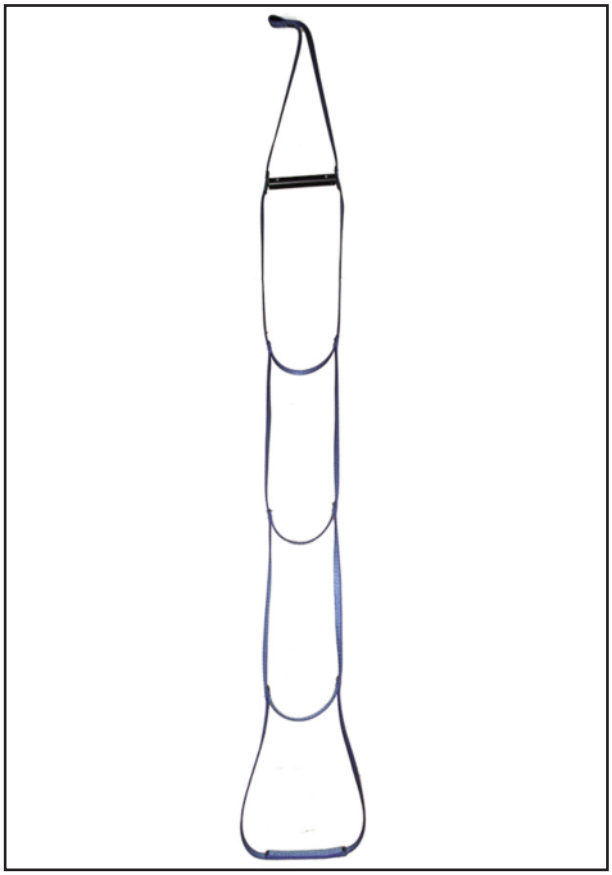

Photo 3: Aspiring four metre webbing sling ladder.
Photo: *Chris Curtis.*

Description: The ladder tested is a standard design from Aspiring (Photo 3) and comes in several lengths. It has a triangular top section with a single eye for attachment. The first rung has a tube to push the sides apart making it easier to get started when down climbing. Rungs are at 300mm spacings. The ladder is not designed specifically for caving though and has some limitations. It also doesn't come with a wire trace, but a trace is not always needed anyway.

I was so impressed with it that I decided I wanted one, but I knew I wanted to make some improvements to suit caving. As I mentioned above it has limitations, such as it is a fixed length. The big advantage of the wire ladders is they can be joined to suit any pitch size.

Custom Design: To fix this problem I designed a webbing ladder to have two eyelets on each end just like a wire ladder (Photos 4, 5). Being a closed eye loop, two carabiners are required to join two ladders (Photo 6). I did design the lengths so that when joined with two carabiners, the 300mm rung spacing is still maintained. The top rung still has the pipe to keep the sides apart.

I went with a six metre ladder as six metres is as high as anyone would ever need for a single ladder. Any longer and you would generally be using SRT gear, unless it's being used as a handline or have a belay backup.

With my design, it's easy to join either two webbing ladders together or join a webbing ladder to a wire ladder. The latter option won't maintain the 300mm spacing across the join and still required two carabiners to join.

I contacted Aspiring about custom design and they said "No problem!" I sent them a fully detailed drawing of my design (good thing I am a draftsperson) and they informed me they could easily make it without any extra charge as my drawing was more than adequate for them to manufacture from. Sweet!

I placed my order and within two weeks it was at my door!

The weight of the six metre ladder is 580 grams and easily fits into a harness bag. I also keep two oval carabiners and a short length of chord in the bag and the total weight is 830 grams.

Orders: If you are interested in purchasing my design, don't hesitate to email me at chrisdavidcurtis@gmail.com.. Other lengths are also available.

Below are a few ways of rigging the ladder (Photos 4, 5, 6, 7).

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Photo 4: Rigging with single line. **Photo:** *Chris Curtis.*

Photo 5: Rigging with single carabiner for smaller anchors. **Photo:** *Chris Curtis.*

Photo 6: Joining two tape sling ladders. **Photo:** *Chris Curtis.*

Photo 7: Using two carabiners for smaller anchors. **Photo:** *Chris Curtis.*

Photo 8: Rigging aroud large anchors. **Photo:** *Chris Curtis.*