

# overlooked climbing companions





**Dear Climber,  
this leaflet has been  
designed for you, to  
help make the  
exciting sport you  
practise even  
friendlier to the  
nature you so much  
enjoy.**

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## Introduction

Sport climbing in cliffs is a combination of movement in a natural environment and extreme physical activity. It is a sophisticated recreational activity that entices man to search for the unknown and reach for the inaccessible. Thanks to the thrill and challenge associated with climbing, increasing numbers of people are drawn to the sport, as is best seen in the rising numbers of new climbing sites.

Until 1994, over 1260 climbing routes were created in Slovenia, but the number increased two-fold over the next five years. Owing to the dramatic popularisation of climbing in natural climbing walls, it is ever more important to make the climbers aware that cliffs are vital to the survival of several endangered plant and animal species.

## Cliffs are home to specially adapted plant and animal species

A number of flowering plants only found in cliffs and crags actually grow out of bare rocks. Without the soil that has been gathering in rock crevices for years and years, these plants could not thrive in locations where



Endemic sandwort  
*Moehringia tommasiniana*



Blue-throated Keeled Lizard - Dalmatian Algyroides

competition with other plants is scarce. Sun-exposed bare rock and stone are a final refuge of many reptiles and other thermophilic animals. Cracks and crevices in the rocks are attractive to certain rare and endangered birds looking for a place to nest.

## And how are these organisms affected by creation of a climbing site in their home cliff?

A climbing site does not necessarily cause any major changes in nature; in fact, the nature's activity may remain almost unchanged before and after the occurrence of climbing. Several species inhabiting cliffs and crags, however, are severely affected by climbing routes, and climbing can even hinder survival of these species in their rocky homes. Bird species such as Blue Rock Thrush, Peregrine Falcon, and many more, have found in cliffs and crags a safe haven against ground predators and other intruders to which steep rock faces are inaccessible. When a cliff is invaded by people, it is no longer safe for these birds, so they abandon it.

## Nesting or climbing site?


Eagle Owl has become a symbol of nature protection in climbing sites as it is extremely sensitive to interruptions around its nest, which the bird normally finds on a sheltered cliff ledge.

Although creation of climbing sites often leads to the removal of trees, bushes, ivy and other plants growing at the foot of the rock wall, physical changes to the cliff are not very important for Eagle Owl. However, the species is most severely affected by repeated and long-term presence of man in the cliff. And sport climbers may stay out in the cliff for most part of the day.

For Eagle Owl, a suitable nest site is one of the key elements of the bird's vast area of activity normally spanning over 10km<sup>2</sup>. Throughout the year the bird keeps returning to the cliff, where it has found a daily resting area and a nest site. Eagle Owl's territorial activities last from autumn to spring, although the nesting itself only finishes in early summer. Owl chicks stay in the nesting cliff with their parents until they can live on their own. Fledged young are cared for by both parents; they are fed and tended and protected against predators and intruders. If the pressure from intruders is excessive, the owl couple will abandon the nest in the following season.



Eagle Owl


A photograph of an Eagle Owl perched on a rocky cliff face. The owl has prominent ear tufts and is looking towards the camera. The background is a dark, textured rock surface.

## Eagle Owl and Climber – Sharing the same preference for cliffs

Not every cliff meets the criteria of an Eagle Owl nest site. A survey into Eagle Owl nesting sites and climbing sites in Slovenia has pointed to an interesting connection between owls and climbers, stating that both are inclined to choose high, steep, dry, warm, rugged but accessible cliffs. The similarity of preferences result from the ecological requirements of Eagle Owl and the needs of climbers.

High and steep cliffs are to Eagle Owl a sign of safety, and to a climber a promise of thrill and challenge. Warm and dry cliffs make for successful Eagle Owl nests. This cliff feature is equally important for climbers, as it enables them to venture in the cliff in winter and early spring, that is at the time of owl nesting. Eagle Owl hunts in open, unforested areas such as normally result from human use. On the other hand, it is understandable that the most frequented climbing sites are those with simple access.

With all these issues considered, it is not uncommon that in Slovenia climbing site locations coincide with Eagle Owl nesting sites.

A photograph of a female rock climber in a red tank top and white pants, climbing a light-colored rock face. She is positioned horizontally, with her arms extended and hands on the rock. Various climbing gear, including ropes and carabiners, are visible on the rock surface.

Knowledge of ecological requirements of plants and animals and the needs of climbers helps us position sport climbing in the environment as nature-friendly as possible.

In recent years, a big step forward has been made by establishing a dialogue between climbers and nature conservationists. We have agreed on mutual exchange of information on creation of new climbing sites and addressed concrete problems in the field. As for the Lijak site in Vipavska dolina and the Štrkljevica site on the Kraški rob ridge, we have managed to find a compromise that will enable climbing in the area without affecting Eagle Owl's long-term survival.

Eagle Owl returned to Štrkljevica after 10 years. In the early 1990s Eagle Owl abandoned its sites on Štrkljevica because of the construction of a climbing site, and eventually the climbers stopped using the cliffs as well. By lifting their limit on new routes, nearby climbing sites were able to accommodate several new climbing routes. As a result, five young Eagle Owls have flown from Štrkljevica in the last two years.



# How can you help?

We expect that as a nature lover you wish to contribute to nature protection and development of informed climbing so we ask you to:

- respect the agreements and local restrictions,
- contribute to better knowledge on the organisms residing in climbing sites and pay attention to ongoing life processes, and
- visit the DOPPS web site **www.ptice.org** on bird-friendly sport climbing, which provides detailed, topical and seasonally updated guidelines on sport climbing.

We believe coexistence is possible. Help us achieve it!

Have a lot of fun climbing!



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