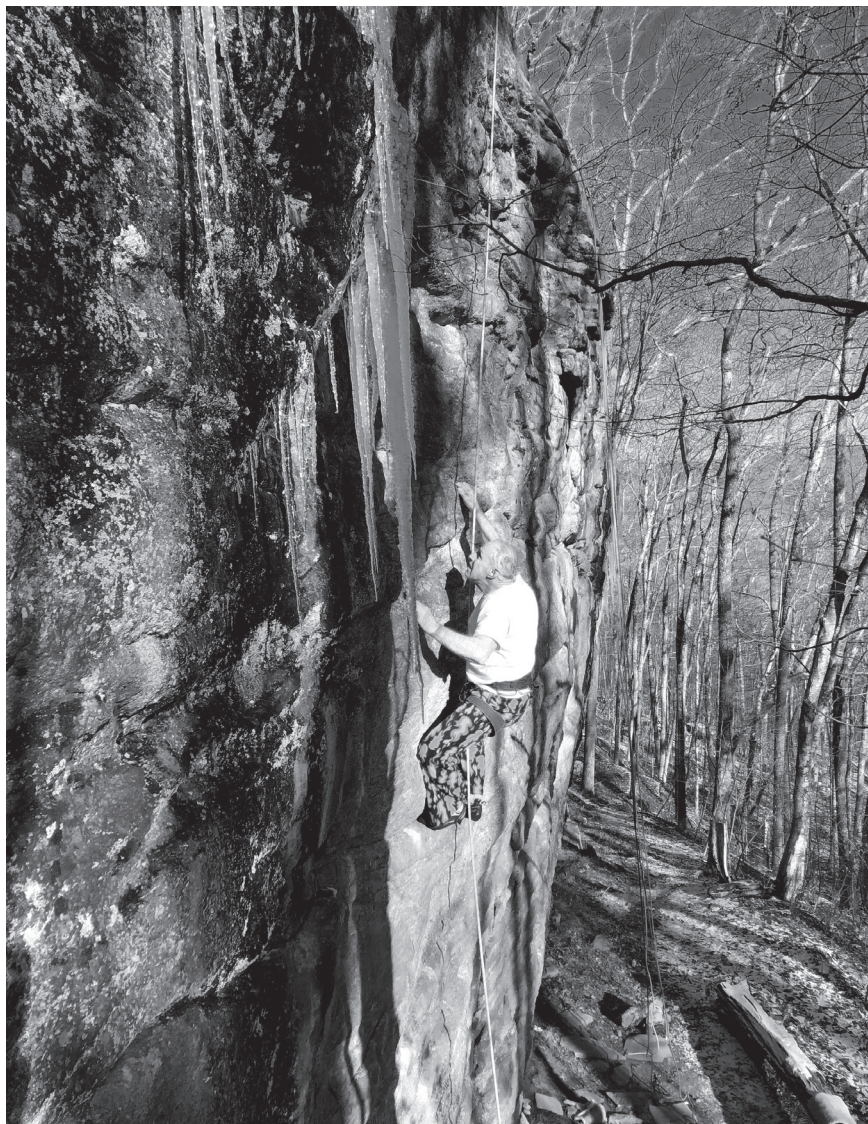


Ken Nichols

A curmudgeon climber committed to his ethics

Stephen Kurczy



WHEN I FIRST MET KEN NICHOLS, IN 2017, HE WAS WEARING PLAYBOY Bunny pajama pants, drinking from a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke, and pounding down handfuls of peanut M&Ms. He was 69 and missing his two front teeth. He was also outclimbing most everybody at Ragged Mountain in central Connecticut.

As I reached out to shake his hand, my mind raced to match up everything I saw to everything I'd heard about Connecticut's most famous climber. Ken had established more than 2,500 first ascents around the Northeast, including the world's longest free-climb, across the 9,000-foot-long cliff face of the Trapps in the Shawangunks near New Paltz, New York. He'd set a Guinness World Record for climbing a challenging, 85-foot-long, slightly overhanging 5.11 route in Connecticut called Dol Guldur more than 10,000 times (the most climbs of a single route by a single person). He'd climbed with such legends as Fritz Wiessner, Royal Robbins, and Lynn Hill. Ken had written three meticulous, witty guidebooks to climbing in Connecticut, which compare "to the run-of-the-mill guidebooks as *Moby Dick* to pulp fiction," as one reviewer said. He sermonized about climbers' responsibility to help maintain the "wilderness experience" by cleaning up trash, limiting trail erosion, avoiding bird nests, and eschewing any practices that might damage the rocks.

Ken was also known as an outcast, agitator, and old grump who saw the world in black and white. He had come out of the clean climbing revolution of the 1970s, when climbers began renouncing pitons and other rock-scarring gear in favor of "clean" tools, such as nuts and camming devices. Ken adopted those ethics as a kind of religion, saying that all climbing should be done cleanly or not at all. A Vietnam veteran, Ken was willing to enforce those rules when the emergence of sport climbing led to widespread bolt-drilling on rappel. In 2013, *Rock and Ice* ran a cover story titled "Connecticut Chop War" that described the decades-long battle between the bolters and Ken, "probably the most famous bolt chopper in the country."

All that backstory was hard to square with the short, gray-haired, twinkly-eyed geriatric who asked if I'd like to take a burn on one of his topropes dangling over the cliff face of Ragged Mountain. How hard could it be? I proceeded to fail to get up either a 5.10 thin crack called Subline or the neighboring 5.9 jamcrack called Unconquerable. Ken stood up and breezed up both classics. Sure, he'd done them each hundreds of times (literally, with proof in

Outfitted in red-flame pajama pants, Ken Nichols climbs past icicles at Husky Rock (also known as Fifty-Foot Cliff), in Mansfield, Connecticut. STEPHEN KURCZY

his meticulous diaries). But it was still mind-blowing. He asked for my name and double-checked the spelling, jotting down the notes. He didn't ask for my cell, because he didn't own one, and neither did I, anyway.

Ken climbed pretty much every day (he once climbed 654 days in a row), and soon I was going out with him three to four times a week. He taught me traditional climbing techniques. He coached me up Dol Guldur, and eventually I was doing solo ascender reps on that test piece of central Connecticut traprock. Ken raked trails, and I helped. We took a camping and climbing trip to Acadia National Park in Maine. He loved finding old lobster buoys and stringing them around his house and yard, and soon my house was also decorated with dozens of buoys he'd found over the decades. He obsessed over hitting daily climbing numbers, often insisting that his totals end with a 0 or 5 (10, 15, 20, etc.). I caught the bug, doing 20, 30, 40 reps each time I went to a crag or gym, just so I could hit my ticks. Ken had once climbed a 32-foot-long, 5.10-route in northeast Connecticut 50 times in a day, which later inspired a young climber from the University of Connecticut to do it 70 times, which then inspired me to one-up them both. With Ken and a friend belaying me, I climbed it 165 times in a single day, adding up to a vertical mile of climbing, with the bloody fingers to prove it. A meticulous recordkeeper, with logbooks going back decades that listed every climb he'd ever done, Ken got me into journaling. Today I keep lists of almost every activity I do, including climbing. His hard stance against bolts forced me to consider what kind of climber I wanted to be.

Like most of Ken's friendships, ours had its falling outs. He considered me a brainwashed liberal (even worse, a journalist from the fake media!). I considered him a conservative war hawk (to boot, a fan of Rush Limbaugh!). He disliked my dog. I disliked his "F**K Biden" flag.

For all his crusty exterior, I witnessed a different character in practice. He was often the friendliest and most outgoing person at the crags, freely offering beta and a top rope. He was constantly picking up trash at cliffs and along trails, eagerly retelling how he'd once collected 945 recyclable cans and bottles in a single day. He survived on aspartame-sweetened bubbly water and chocolate-glazed legumes. He drove old vehicles. Rather than work a desk job (well, he tried for a while, once causing a storm when he brought a 62-inch-long black rat snake into the office), he dedicated all his time to outdoor adventure.

Ken was committed. He was reliable. He was complicated. It's difficult to come into the orbit of a person who is so fiercely principled and not feel

challenged, impressed, and even changed. Not many people burn that hot for so long.

In Guy and Laura Waterman's classic *Yankee Rock and Ice* (Stackpole Books, 1993), they described Ken as "a person of fierce principles, abrasive candor, and phenomenal dedication to the sport of climbing and to the merits of his chosen locale, the short traprock cliffs of central Connecticut." Mention his name at any climbing area, and it'll likely spark a discussion. In my own reporting over the years, I once interviewed the climber Paul Piana, who in 1988 made the historic first free team ascent of the Salathé Wall on El Capitan—then considered the hardest route in the world—and I asked if he'd ever heard of Ken. Of course he had. When Ken worked part-time as a guidebook editor for the American Alpine Club, he had edited Piana's 1983 climbing guide to *The Needles in the Black Hills of South Dakota*.

"I always admired his climbing," Piana said of Ken, describing him as a "pioneer" in his usage of clean climbing tools and in forcing tough conversations around climbing ethics.

"I was on his side for quite a while," Piana added, "and then I was introduced to some areas that had sport climbs and I thought, 'This is good too.' But I'm with him. Just because something is hard doesn't mean you need to make it a sport climb. I think people like him are really, really good for the sport because it makes people think, 'Gee, do I really want to bolt this? What style should it be?'"

Piana recalled how Ken's name came up in conversation during a car ride with fellow American Royal Robbins and the British climbers Ken Wilson, Chris Bonington, and Jim Curran. They all appreciated that Ken had put his reputation on the line in the name of climbing ethics, that he fought to preserve a risk-laden activity that also brought joy and meaning to many people. Sure, bolts make cliffs more accessible. Some places can't be climbed without them. But something can also be lost with them. "There's a nobility in being able to climb these desperate and sometimes fatal-if-you-fall climbs," Piana said. "And they wanted to preserve that. Royal admired those that tried to keep the faith, so to speak. Ken was really bold. It takes a lot of guts to do that."

At the age of 73, in November 2021, Ken took a serious fall while solo-climbing—it was just after his 4,589th free ascent of the year (127,589th free ascent of his lifetime), and that odd number seemed to hurt as much as anything. He fractured his spine, dislocated his right shoulder, and permanently lost the ability to lift his right arm above his head. During the weeks he spent in a hospital, a rotation of climbers visited him, and we later took turns

helping him and his wife get back to the hospital for checkups. To try to cheer him up, we collectively climbed enough routes that last month of the year to bring his combined total to 5,000 annual ascents; in the process, we caught the Ken bug and pushed the total to 5,555. We all wondered what he would do without climbing in his life anymore.

I recently moved to the Adirondacks, and before I left Connecticut, I stopped by Ken's house. It had been a few years since we'd spoken, having lost touch without the shared connection in climbing. He invited me to sit down outside. His wife dished us all bowls of ice cream, and he regaled me with stories about his new obsessions: hiking, sea kayaking in Maine, and trail maintenance at several state parks. That weekend he gave me, my wife, and our kids a tour of his trails. He also sold me several cams that he said would be essential if I was ever to try to repeat a 5.11 multipitch route in the Adirondacks called "Creation of the World," at Moss Cliff near Whiteface Mountain, of which he made the first ascent in 1987. The route also contained a bit of Ken's personal evolution when it came to climbing ethics.

When I looked up the route online, I discovered a bolt on the first pitch. I asked Ken what that was about. He said he and his climbing partner had taken turns drilling the hole and hammering the sleeve while free on lead, as it was the only way to get through a blank face that provided access to the above crack system.

"That was the last bolt I ever had anything to do with placing," Ken said. "And you know what? We did every other ascent clean after that. I was so sick of the bolting scene that was developing across the country that I resolved I was never going to place another piton or bolt or anything that would scar the rock again."

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For Kurczy's piece on his "vertical mile" in Connecticut, see "The Vertical Mile: An obsession of repeated climbs," Appalachia, Winter/Spring 2021. For Michael Levy's piece on Ken Nichols' record number of ascents, see, "The Man Who Climbed 100,000 Climbs," in the Alpina section of Appalachia, Summer/Fall 2017.