

Using Amsteel Blue Rope at Philmont Scout Ranch

By Al Geist

A number of Philmont crews are now lightening their crew gear weight by carrying “Amsteel Blue” rope rather than the standard issue Philmont rope. 150 feet of Philmont rope weighs about 2 ½ pounds and has a tensile strength of 1200 pounds. 150 feet of the 7/64” Amsteel Blue rope weighs 8oz and has a tensile strength of 1600 pounds. We carried two 150 foot sections on our 2009 Philmont Trek – one as the main rope and one as the oops rope. By making them the same length, they were a backup for each other if one rope got damaged or lost. (Sadly, I’ve read a couple stories of the Amsteel rope being stolen at Philmont.) We had no such problems and the ropes showed no signs of wear at the end of our trek.

We used these ropes in the standard “Philmont Way” bear bagging method. Both ropes are doubled over and a small loop tied in the middle. This makes the rope effectively 75 feet long. We needed that length at a couple of our camps, so I would not recommend starting out with 100 feet of rope as I have read some have tried to do. Some have gotten away with using paracord for the oops bag rope, but Philmont does not approve using paracord for bear bagging. There is no reason to push this rule –Amsteel rope is lighter than paracord, so use it for both ropes and save weight all around.

The “Philmont Way” also includes a climbing carabineer (a real one - not a cheap key ring). This is clipped in the loop of the main bag rope. The doubled over “oops bag rope” runs through the carabineer. But I get ahead of myself. The first step is to throw the main rope over the bear cable. Despite what I saw other crews do, Philmont does not allow tying rocks, sticks, or nalgene bottles to the end of the rope to throw it. The danger is two-fold. The rock can come loose and hit a bystander. The rock can stay tied and swing back and hit the thrower.

Here is the first innovation our crew used to get the light Amsteel rope over a 20’ high cable. The rope was carried stuffed in a small dry sack with the carabineer already clipped to the loop. The scout reached into the bag, pulled out the carabineer (rope still attached) and clipped it to his belt (typically just to a belt loop). He then pulled out about 15’ of rope from the bag. The rest of the rope in the dry sack forms the weight that will be thrown. The dry sack (top still open) is squeezed down to the size of a baseball and tossed over the cable. As the sack comes down the rope pulls out of the bag. The sack is used for carrying the rope as well as throwing it. The carabineer on the belt keeps the sack from pulling the whole rope over the cable.

Multiple bags are tied with lark’s head knots in the rope on both sides of the carabineer. I was surprised by how many Philmont issue bear bags it takes to hold four days of food for the entire crew. It took four bags just to hold the bulky food that Philmont uses. A couple more bags were needed for the oops bags.

Before lifting the bags, the loop of the oops rope is threaded through the carabineer and pulled through far enough so it will dangle within reach when the main bags are lifted.

Here is the second innovation – Take the small dry sack now lying on the ground and use the buckle to clip it to the loop in the oops rope. After the main bags are lifted all the way to the cable and the two ends of the main rope are tied off to two different trees (neither being the cable-holding trees), the oops rope is left running up through the carabineer and back down all over the ground. The oops bags will not be ready to lift for hours – right before bedtime. So meanwhile, take all this loose rope and stuff it into the small dry sack hanging on the oops bag loop about three to four feet off the ground. Then roll the dry sack closed to hold the oops rope off the ground so it doesn't get dirty and so rodents can't climb the rope to your food. The sack is used to hold the oops rope off the ground.

Let's step back to the tying off step. The "Philmont Way" uses compression knots to tie the main and oops ropes to trees. A compression knot is super simple. Just wrap the rope around the tree a bunch of times and then wedge the rest of the rope in the "V" formed by the rope coming down from the cable and the tree. Amsteel rope is of small diameter and slick. Both of these features works against it when doing a compression knot. The first day we tied up our bear bags they had crept down nearly a foot by morning. So we modified how we did the compression knot to improve the hold when using Amsteel rope.

Here is the third innovation – Wrap the tree in a spiral down about 8 inches and then back up over those wraps, and then back down. And so on until finally stuffing the wad of the rest of the rope in the "V" as usual. By spiraling up and down, the Amsteel rope holds many times better than just wrapping straight around the tree over the same 8 inch area. We had no problems with creep or slippage the rest of our trek. How the Amsteel rope is wrapped around the tree matters.

Final innovation – it is bedtime and there are the oops bags to raise. First pull the oops rope out of the dry sack. We learned the hard way to just leave the dry sack clipped to the oops bag loop. We were delayed one morning early in our trek when we could not find the rope sack because someone had stuffed it into his pants pocket. Two crew members had already dumped their packs out looking for it before the sack turned up. From then on we left the sack clipped to the oops loop overnight were it was pulled up with the oops bags and lowered in the morning ready to stuff the Amsteel rope in.

Hopefully this short write up of what we came up with to make our use of the Amsteel Blue rope easier will be helpful to other Philmont crews in the future. Enjoy your trek!