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# Rise of Wind Turbines Is a Boon for Rope Workers

By [KATE GALBRAITH](#)

MAHANOY TOWNSHIP, Pa. — Suspended by ropes from the top of a giant wind turbine, two men slowly descended down a long, silvery blade. Then they got to work, and from 150 feet above the ground, the hum of a sander filled the air.

For Matt Touchette and Sequoia Haughey, it was another day at the office.

“Pretty gusty wind,” Mr. Touchette reported over a crackling radio from his bird’s-eye perch.

Rope specialists like Mr. Touchette and Mr. Haughey have long filled a range of niche jobs, like inspecting big dams, cleaning Mount Rushmore and repairing offshore [oil](#) platforms. But as [wind farms](#) have sprouted across the nation, rope companies have quickly expanded into a new line of work — fixing turbines so they last longer in the elements.

It’s a dream job for rock-climbing types.

Rope Partner, the Santa Cruz, Calif., company that employs Mr. Touchette and Mr. Haughey, was founded in 2001 by an avid climber, Chris Bley, after he learned the ropes, so to speak, from two Germans he met while scaling granite cliffs in Joshua Tree National Park in the 1990s. The Germans were part of a rope-work team that helped wrap the Reichstag, where Germany’s Parliament meets, in fabric as an art installation.

The jobs these days involve inspecting turbines, cleaning them and repairing them, which becomes necessary if a blade is struck by lightning or damaged by ice. The blades are made of fiberglass, and repair jobs may involve taking out the old fiberglass and putting in new material, which then needs to be sanded down for smoothness.

“I was just amazed to think you could actually make a business out of working on ropes,” said Mr. Bley, who occasionally gets recruits from a Santa Cruz rock-climbing gym in which he invested.

At least a handful of small rope companies now work on turbines. Some, like East River Rigging of Brooklyn, are new and do regional rope work of all kinds. Others, like Skala of Reno, Nev., are longtime rope specialists that moved into wind-turbine work when the boom began several years ago. Rope Partner focuses solely on turbines.

Starting a rope company is not easy. Turbine owners and manufacturers generally demand to see an established safety record. Liability and workers' compensation insurance can be hard to get, and climbers typically need a certain level of certification from the Society of Professional Rope Access Technicians, a trade group, before they are allowed to work on the turbines.

Igor Stomp, chairman of the communications committee at the society, estimated that the cost of a basic one-day job by two climbers might start at \$2,000 — and rise substantially for harder tasks.

From the technicians' perspective, "it pays well — for dirtbag climbers," Mr. Haughey said with a laugh.

About half of Rope Partner's technicians double as recreational climbers, Mr. Bley estimated. Their job, requiring them to fly around the country for projects that can last up to several months, offers an on-and-off lifestyle that allows them to climb or relax during their weeks off.

Even on the job, the workers sometimes cannot get enough of the ropes. At the Pennsylvania site, which is near Hazleton, when it was too rainy or windy to work safely, Mr. Touchette and Mr. Haughey — who between them have conquered El Capitan and Half Dome in Yosemite National Park — headed off to what Mr. Touchette described as a "scruffy little cliff in the forest" some 25 minutes away, to climb.

On fair weather days, the two men's first step was to make sure the turbine was turned off, so it would not spin while they were on it, a potentially deadly proposition. Then they carefully organized their gear for the day — mixing chemicals to create a gel coating to treat the blades, assembling snacks and suiting up in helmets and ropes.

After vanishing up the tower, the two climbers appeared as tiny specks at the top of the turbine. Each was secured to the top by two ropes. They let themselves slowly down the blade, which was pointed toward the ground, and got to work. An orange extension cord, over 150 feet long, accompanied them, to power the sander.

Some 300 certified rope specialists like them — or rope access technicians — work on turbines in North America, and that number may triple in three years, according to Mr. Stomp. Already, he said, demand is so acute that his own rope company, WindSwain, has an eight-week waiting list.

Mr. Stomp and others say that no rope expert has been killed or seriously injured on wind turbines. The method is safer and generally cheaper, rope advocates argue, than alternatives like using a crane or a skybucket.

There are dangers, however. This year, a turbine technician for Skala was high up on a turbine when the blade — whose pitch angle was being adjusted with the aid of one of the manufacturers' technicians — shifted in an unexpected way, according to Chad Shearer, a training manager at Skala.

No one was hurt, said Mr. Shearer, who cited a fault in the turbine and said his company complained to the manufacturer.

Standard industrial accidents do happen — Mr. Haughey, for example, once got the tip of his finger caught in a moving part inside a turbine, though he was not on ropes at the time. Workers sometimes drop small untethered items, like bolts.

On the chilly day that they sanded the turbine blade in Pennsylvania, Mr. Touchette and Mr. Haughey dropped nothing, but warned visitors at the base of their turbine to stand upwind, just in case.

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