

# Adrenaline Rush

I caught up—sort-of—with outdoor enthusiast and nationally syndicated columnist Stephen Regenold, a.k.a. “The Gear Junkie,” this summer. While I was enjoying a relaxing camping and hiking vacation with my family in upstate New York, Regenold, whose column focuses on reviews of outdoor technical gear, was exploring the wilds of who-knows-

where, and fittingly (for the subject of this article) we used electronic gizmos to swap stories and develop this interview. And truth be told, while I play a mean left defense in old men’s ice hockey, I couldn’t catch up with the much younger, and much more fit Regenold, on a bet.

—Dave Nelson



Regenold in June 2009 backpacking the Devil’s Path in the Catskills.

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Regenold on the summit of Mount Rainier, Washington.

**Conservationist: Tell me about your youth: where did you grow up? Did you take apart the lawnmower, or the family Buick, in the backyard?**

**GJ:** I grew up near Minneapolis; I was practically born on skis and in a canoe. My family took me camping from six months of age through high adventure with Dad as a teenager. We trained for a year and climbed Devils Tower, a 1,000-foot monolith in Wyoming, when I was 17.

My family's business is locksmithing. I did it in college; I enjoyed tinkering. We didn't have a lot of money, but we made do with Army Surplus gear and even some homemade items. Once, we fashioned an ad hoc ice axe for winter climbing out of a garden tool. Bad idea! It was those early, bad formative gear moments that converted me into a "junkie" and a connoisseur of the very best gear around.

**Conservationist: How did you get your start reviewing gear and writing?**

**GJ:** In college I created a small climbing magazine called *Vertical Jones*. The local paper in Minneapolis wrote a story about me and a couple of the editors. That same writer at the paper later started a weekly outdoors section, and I offered to do gear reviews

for it. *Gear Junkie* was born, and over a few years it blossomed into a nationally-syndicated column and [www.gearjunkie.com](http://www.gearjunkie.com).

**Conservationist: Were you an excellent writer in college?**

**GJ:** Probably a B+ student. I did have the motivation to start that 'zine, however. That's the ball that got my career rolling.

**Conservationist: Your job—testing and reviewing gear—sounds awesome. Is it all fun and games?**

**GJ:** I'm at a desk most days. I work hard, and I play hard. I travel about once a month. But I run, bike, paddle, etc., all the time in and around my hometown. And I do about 20 competitive running, orienteering and adventure races per year to stay in shape, including marathons and ultra events.

**Conservationist: Testing gear is obviously your passion. But is testing your body physically as much a part of the challenge?**

**GJ:** Right. I am more about pushing my body and mind to the utter limit. Gear just helps me get there, or makes me faster! I had an epiphany a couple years ago that if I eat and hydrate right, pace myself, and stay mentally aggressive and positive, I can keep going for hours and

hours and hours. I have gone straight through on races without sleep for more than 48 hours. Pushing hard for 48 hours and more than 100 miles on foot and bike—it is crazy. It expands your mind.

**Conservationist: I'm guessing your wife also enjoys outdoor adventures.**

**GJ:** When we dated, she did things like climb 5.10 rock routes. (*Editor's note: these are very difficult, technical climbs.*) She got me into marathons. She is still active and outdoorsy, but usually now with a kid on her hip.

**Conservationist: How has having children changed your work?**

**GJ:** My wife and I bring the kids along everywhere. They have camped since they were four months old, including road trips through Scandinavia and backpacking trips. We try not to let them slow us down too much. And they love the pace! Naturally, my interest in kid-based gear has grown along with that.

**Conservationist: Did I see a review of a (gasp) family tent in your column?**

**GJ:** I'm a big family guy. We do camping weekends where my siblings and their families, and my parents, reserve sites next to each other. It's a two-day festival of campfires and little-kid mayhem with cousins, nieces, nephews, and dogs.



Testing a Speedo competitive swim suit at Cedar Lake in Minneapolis.

**Conservationist: You've created your own niche. Do you see yourself doing this at age 40? At 50?**

**GJ:** At 40 or 50, for sure; beyond that, who knows? I'm 32 years old. But I've always seen myself as someone who will take up long-distance bike vagabonding in my old age.

**Conservationist: Do you see trends in gear development? Miniaturization? Comfort?**

**GJ:** A continuation of keeping things lightweight, streamlined and simple to use. Some of the biggest recent technological advances are in clothing and outerwear. There is an uninterrupted march toward the perfect wicking base layer and waterproof-breathable shells that actually work. Another thing: the iPhone and Google Maps are getting more people interested and familiar with street maps, topo maps, and satellite views. As a map nerd myself, I think this is a good trend.

**Conservationist: What are your favorite outdoor activities?**

**GJ:** Orienteering is the best sport on the planet. It combines all-out aerobic capacity (running), with on-the-move map reading and decision making, with unfettered backwoods exploration (bushwhacking). Love it! Adventure racing is a close second. And my other longtime favorites are cycling (any type), skiing (backcountry, alpine, and cross-country), and rock climbing. Plus, I am addicted to running, and run three or four times a week.

**Conservationist: What is your favorite outdoor spot in New York and why is it so?**

**GJ:** Last summer, I backpacked the Devil's Path, a 25-mile trail through the Catskills. Quite an epic hike, actually. We did it over two days, including one 17-mile day in which we climbed four peaks. You can read about it in the *New York Times*, September 25, 2009 edition.

**Conservationist: Do you have a funny story or adventure you'd like to share?**

**GJ:** My worst incident—and this is an episode that could have killed me—was about 10 years ago when I was testing an emergency rappelling system for *Vertical Jones* magazine. The rappelling product, which included a fanny pack stuffed with 4mm cord and a special rappel device, was made for emergency situations when you needed to abseil a cliff but did not want to have to bring along a regular climbing rope. Anyway, I didn't trust the setup at all, and so when testing it on a 100-foot sheer cliff I had a climbing partner back me up with another rope. I rappelled, and the little cord did fine, but while



Regenold navigating a one-person “pack raft” through a set of rapids on the Arkansas River, Colorado.

wrapping it up at the bottom I noticed that the cord was sliced almost all the way through near one end. Very bad. Not sure if it came like that from the company or if something on the cliff face cut it, but I was glad I had that backup line as my life hung literally by a thread.

**Conservationist:** There is a lot of focus these days on nature-deficit disorder. Do your gear reviews help people experience the outdoors?

**GJ:** I hope so. My altruistic motive is to get people excited, outside, and having (active) fun.

**Conservationist:** I’m almost afraid to ask. What’s on your “to-do” list?

**GJ:** In February, I’ll be participating in the Patagonian Expedition Race in Chile’s Tierra del Fuego at the tip of the South American Continent. In April, I’ll join a team from Expedition Champion on a week-long uphill trek to Base Camp on Mount Everest—at 17,700 feet. Since founding *Gear Junkie* in 2002, I have strived to push my personal limits on mountaineering trips, marathons, multi-day ultra races, and other wilderness excursions around the globe. But I’ve never been to Nepal. You could say I’m looking forward to it.

*Conservationist* Editor **Dave Nelson** enjoys the wilds of New York in a slightly less aggressive way than the *Gear Junkie*.

**Stephen Regenold** writes the nationally syndicated column, the *Gear Junkie*. His website, [www.gearjunkie.com](http://www.gearjunkie.com) includes reviews of all kinds of outdoor technical gear, from camping and hiking equipment to technical rock-climbing gear, bicycles and helmet cameras.

Regenold on the summit of Alta Peak in Sequoia National Park. Winter ascent, February, 2009.



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