



AAC Publications

Weather - Thunderstorm Causing Falling Rocks, Inadequate Clothing and Equipment - Left at Base of Climb

California, Yosemite Valley, Middle Cathedral Rock Descent Gully

On June 4, Joe Ripperger (50) and Claire Epperson (25) climbed the East Buttress (11 pitches, 5.10c). The forecast for the day called for temperatures in the low 80s with a 15 to 30 percent chance of rain, so they started climbing at 6 a.m. They left their warm clothes (fleece) at the base and climbed in T-shirts—because of the warm forecast—but they did carry lightweight rain gear and headlamps. They summited by 2 p.m. with no problems, except for getting off-route for an hour. At 3:30 they started rappelling the descent gully, normally a scramble with short rappels.

Dark clouds had been moving in since about 1 p.m., when they were one or two pitches from the top, but there had been no rain. Claire was 50 to 75 feet down the first rappel on their 60-meter lead line, and Joe was at the top of the gully, when a thunderstorm opened up. Within a couple of minutes a flash flood poured over the top of Middle Cathedral, bringing rocks down with it, one of which dented Claire's helmet. She tried to stem the narrow gully sides but was caught in the flood anyway, with water at thigh level. It was very noisy. They had to communicate by screaming at each other. The rappel line was caught under falling rocks, but Claire was able to prusik about 10 feet and reach the tag line, which Joe had let slide down the lead line. Now he could belay and pull her while she hand-over-handed up the rope. Their lead rope was trapped in the gully, leaving them at the top with only the tag line. Both were now soaked and becoming hypothermic despite rain gear. They spent several hours looking for another way down, knowing it was unlikely. It was now dark, with temps down to 40 to 45 degrees (F) and dropping.

Around 8 p.m. they decided that the gully was their only way out. The rain and flood had finally receded to knee level, and the stuck rope had somehow become unstuck, so they managed to get down by rappelling single strands simultaneously and leaving both ropes behind. By this time they had stopped shivering and no longer felt soaking wet. However, they were unsteady and having trouble concentrating because they were so cold. They got to their car near midnight. They did not go back to the start of the climb for their pack. Joe called us the next day to report the incident so we wouldn't start searching if someone reported the abandoned ropes and clothing.

Analysis

Joe Ripperger has 30 years of climbing experience, including Zodiac on El Cap and other routes in Yosemite, and winter ascents in Canada. Claire has five years of climbing experience. She leads trad 5.8, follows harder, and has climbed in Yosemite and elsewhere with Joe.

They lost an hour or so getting off-route on the climb, but that's common, and you can't always avoid sudden changes in the weather, especially if these changes are very different from the predictions. The lack of warm clothes put them in danger, but they were smart to get an early start and to carry rain gear, tag line, and headlamps. There is plenty of firewood up there that would work even if wet, but they had no fire kit.

They had a personal locator beacon (PLB), but they didn't think anyone would be able to come up the gully that night and didn't think they would survive the night anyway, so they didn't activate it, figuring they had to get out on their own. Their cell phones got no service in the Valley so they had not brought

them on the climb.

In Mr. Ripperger's words: "Most of us climb light, with only the gear we'll need for the climb and descent. In the past, I've always gotten away with that strategy. On Middle Cathedral it was different. Although we were prepared for rain on the route, we weren't adequately prepared for a 50°F drop in temp! Especially in summer. So, it wasn't the rain that got us, it was the sudden cold temperature. Now I'm including a fire starter on every climb where there might be access to wood, and an emergency shelter. And I won't be leaving my fleece behind in order to save a little weight. It's remarkable how fast things can crap out and deteriorate. Experience is indeed important, but it doesn't substitute for adequately preparing for a cold overnight. I learned that the hard way."

For a more extreme incident involving these same hazards, see Cathedral Peak, ANAM 2008. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger.)

Images

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