



AAC Publications

Near Miss – Rope-Soloing With A Stuck Rope That Appeared To Be Fixed

California, Yosemite National Park, Arch Rock

On December 3, I (Ryan, 31) went to Arch Rock to rope-solo fixed routes. I had heard there was a rope on Supplication (5.10c), and I had wanted to get on that route for more than a year. (Note: Fixed-rope soloing is free climbing while belayed by ascension devices connecting the climber to a fixed rope. It is a top-rope alternative that does not require a belayer.)

The approach trail hits the base of the cliff near Midterm (5.10b). I hadn't planned on climbing Midterm, but I was excited to see a new-looking purple rope hanging down the route. There is a squeeze chimney toward the top of the climb, and chimneys being a weakness of mine, I decided I'd warm up on Midterm before heading over to Supplication.

I attached myself to the fixed line using a combination of a Petzl Mini-Traxion and a Petzl Basic Ascender, and started up Midterm. I immediately knew I was in for more than I'd bargained for. The 5.10b fingers start looked benign from the ground, but I ended up hanging on the rope several times in that section. I cruised through 40 feet of 5.9 hands before getting worked in the 5.10 offwidth section below the chimney (again hanging a few times). At a nice rest stance near the top of the offwidth (80 feet off the deck), I noticed that the rope did not, in fact, go to the top of the chimney, but ended about six feet above me in the entrance of the chimney. I thought that maybe it was fixed to a chockstone in the chimney, but I couldn't see it from my stance. Clearly, the rope-fixer had not been as excited as I was about getting chimney practice! Without climbing any farther, I popped my Grigri onto the rope, lowered myself to the ground, and had a snack. I did two laps on Supplication and gave Leanie Meanie a try (failed) before heading home for the day,

Once home, I went to Mountainproject.com to see what others thought of that fingers section on Midterm. On the Midterm webpage, I saw a comment from the day before from a guy who had gotten his purple rope stuck and was asking if someone would get it for him. My heart dropped. It took a few minutes to come to terms with the fact that I had been climbing and lowering on a stuck rope. Rain was coming in that night, so I hoped no one else would be up there for a few days. The next morning I told Ranger Jesse McGahey what had happened.

Analysis

Ryan: I use fixed ropes regularly to get laps in when I can't find partners. I set up my own fixed ropes for one-day use throughout the year, and in winter I climb other people's ropes at the Cookie and Arch Rock. Until Midterm, I had taken for granted that a rope with a coil at the bottom, hanging off the ground, was a fixed rope intended for climbing. Going forward, I will continue using other people's fixed ropes but will make sure I can clearly see the rope tied into an anchor above before climbing the route.

Jesse McGahey: On December 5 I climbed Midterm with a partner to retrieve the purple rope. About 85 feet up and 30 feet below the regular anchor, a single bight of the rope, four feet from its end, was pinched between the face of the chimney and a softball-size rock in some sand. It took two seconds to pull it out. The rope was stuck only six to eight feet above where Ryan had stopped. If he had continued climbing into the chimney, he would have changed the angle of pull on the rope, very likely pulling it out. He then effectively would have been free-soloing a 5.10 offwidth chimney.

The purple rope was a 9.4mm dynamic lead line, which might raise one's suspicions, since climbers usually leave static lines for fixed-rope soloing. While I was retrieving the rope, a climber came up to the base and told us not to take it down, that it was fixed, and that his friends had left it there. Even after we told him it was not fixed, he pleaded with us to leave it up so that he could take a lap on it. We possibly saved his life by removing the line.

In 2012 a climber became stranded on the Cookie Cliff after rope-soloing a fixed line (Accidents 2013). Stories of climbers incorrectly rigging their ascension/belay devices are common, including a 20-foot fall at the Cookie Cliff. Others have completed a pitch only to discover they've forgotten their descent device. Somehow none of these mishaps have involved injuries, but complacency abounds. As in other forms of climbing, fixed-rope climbers should be systematic and wary about their practices. (Sources: Ryan, a.k.a. "Mr. Lucky," and Jesse McGahey, NPS Ranger.)

(Editor's note: Many of the names used in the reports from Yosemite are pseudonyms, used at the request of the climbers.)

Images

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