



## AAC Publications

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### **Rockfall – Late Start, Darkness**

Utah, Mt. Olympus, West Slabs

On July 5, Mary Ann Overfelt and I set out to tackle the West Slabs of Mt. Olympus (1,600', 5.5), east of Salt Lake City. We started hiking a bit later than we would have liked, but still reached the start of the route about 11 a.m. A few other parties were in the vicinity, but we felt we could move at a good pace and that daylight would not be an issue. The West Slabs are very wide and low-angle, with dozens of variations. I am a very experienced climber (12+ years), but this was Mary Ann's second time climbing. That said, she has been a quick study and easily tackled this challenge.

By the time we reached the large ledge near the top it was 1.5 to 2 hours before sunset. We spent a bit of time on the ledge and considered our options before deciding to rappel the gully to the west via a number of fixed slings on trees. After three rappels we reached a point where we could begin to scramble. Wisely, we kept our helmets on. The sun was setting about this time.

The scramble was loose, dirty, and sometimes rather steep. We were careful to give each other space to avoid knocking rocks on each other. As darkness fell in the canyon we continued our descent but did not feel the need to turn on our headlamps; we could see the way quite easily.

About two-thirds of the way down the main scrambling section, Mary Ann noticed something large hurtling down the cliff toward us. She immediately yelled, "Rock, rock, rock!" Instinctively, we both dropped and tried to make smaller targets. I was carrying the larger pack and had the rope strapped to my pack (and a helmet on), and by going into "turtle mode" I was well-protected. Mary Ann was able to press herself against the lower wall.

As the large rock came down, it broke into a number of smaller chunks. Several small to medium-size rocks hit Mary Ann's helmet, leg, and hip; she sustained some bruising and abrasions. Numerous small pieces rained down on me, striking my helmet and pack, but did not cause any injuries. It was quite obvious that a few larger pieces bounced around us.

As we continued down, we looked back up and noticed two headlamps high above on the big ledge. We concluded that the climbing party likely had dislodged the rock that came down at us. Given the distance, it would've been difficult for us to hear them clearly yelling "rock!" We completed the rest of the two-mile scramble and hike back to the car without incident.

### **Analysis**

Mary Ann was exceptionally quick to recognize the large rock coming toward us, immediately yell "rock!" and get herself into the safest position possible. Again, this was her second time climbing...ever.

In retrospect, we could have started the day earlier and descended with more daylight. Had a rock fallen during the day, we might have seen it even earlier and avoided any impacts. Perhaps the most important thing is that both of us were still wearing our helmets. Many climbers choose to either A) not wear helmets (dumb) or B) take them off when descending (nearly as dumb as A). Keeping our helmets on might well have saved our lives. (Source: Andrew Weinmann.)

[Editor's note: It's equally important to consider when to don your helmet during the approach. Too many climbers leave it until they reach the base of a route and start gearing up. Take the time to put on your helmet as soon as you reach terrain exposed to potential rockfall or icefall, whether natural or climber-caused.]

## Images



Mt. Olympus. The West Slabs are the most prominent slabs in right center.

## Article Details

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