



AAC Publications

Rockfall, Poor Position, Inadequate Equipment

Colorado, San Juan Mountains, El Diente Peak

During the weekend of June 29-30, my son and I climbed the North Buttress Route (Class 3) on El Diente Peak (14,165 feet) and subsequently made the traverse to Mt. Wilson (14,252 feet). We had four experienced people in our party and were careful to stay out of the fall line of each other. To save time, we had two people climbing in lockstep near each other, so that if the lead climber triggered rockfall it would not have much momentum before hitting his partner.

The last third of the El Diente–Wilson traverse contained a lot of bad rock. We considered descending and walking below the last ridge, but there was a big snowfield with soft snow covering a sheet of ice. It didn't present a good option.

To address the situation, two members of our party climbed the 50-foot “staircase” that leads to a catwalk. We watched them disappear over the top and waited for them to be completely off the climb before following. We yelled a few times to confirm it was safe to follow, but could not hear their reply. We started up the staircase (Class 3). After approximately 10 feet my partner asked to lead the pitch since he was a better climber. I had stepped aside onto a small ledge to let him take the lead when one of the climbers above knocked loose a small pebble from the top of the ridge. The pebble hit a large rock, causing it to tumble. In turn the rock hit a boulder, causing a few thousand pounds of rock to start falling down the staircase.

I was very fortunate to be protected on that side ledge. I received a small blow to the cheek but nothing severe. My helmet effectively blocked the small debris that rained down on me. With my body pressed against the cliff, I watched as dozens of rocks whizzed past me.

My partner was not as lucky. He was right in the middle of the staircase with no protection. Luckily, he managed to jump off a 10-foot cliff, take a couple of bounds, and get himself out of harm's way. At least 10 boulders big enough to crush us fell down the staircase. (Source: Edited from an anonymous report at 14ers.com.)

Analysis

Loose rock is an unavoidable hazard on some “classic” ridge traverses. To minimize the dangers, avoid climbing below others (wait until they have cleared the area), climb “nose to butt” so rockfall can't gain momentum between members of the party, test handholds with a rap of your palm against the rock, climb early in the morning, and always wear a helmet. This party did all of these things and yet was fortunate to escape without serious injury. (Source: Aram Attarian.)

Images

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