



AAC Publications

Stranded, Failed to Follow Route – Inadequate Food/Water/Clothing/Equipment

Nevada, Red Rock, Pine Creek Canyon, Cat In The Hat

My climbing partner, Marty Goss (50) and I, Paul Spence (52), met at Red Rock for a week of climbing. On March 14 we had planned to climb Cat in the Hat, a six-pitch 5.6 trad route in Pine Creek Canyon. We were the only ones on the route and could see another set of climbers on the opposite wall across the canyon. By the time we were on the fifth pitch, a pair of faster climbers had caught up with us. They were smooth and very efficient at building anchors.

Sometime late in the climb, we could hear someone calling for assistance. We thought was coming from the climbers across the canyon, but we couldn't see them. During our second rappel from the top, we realized the calls for assistance were actually coming from climbers who were stranded below us. As best we could decipher, their rope didn't reach the ground during their last rappel. When we reached our fourth rappel station, we decided we would rappel down to assist the stranded pair.

While the climbers above us angled to the left to access the normal descent route, Marty and I rappelled down the fall line to reach the stranded climbers. Before rappelling, we confirmed with the stranded climbers that we could reach the ground from their location with two ropes (ours and theirs combined). Marty rappelled first. As soon as he could, Marty confirmed that our rope would indeed reach the stranded couple before committing to the rappel any farther.

Upon reaching the young college couple, he found them standing on an 18- inch ledge. He learned they were on spring break with friends from University of Utah. The gal was anchored into a small tree, and the guy wasn't anchored into anything. He was just standing on the ledge and not tied in. Neither had helmets. Marty told the guy to immediately tie into the tree. It was getting toward the end of the day, and the sun was setting beyond the canyon walls. The gal, who was wearing short shorts and a halter top, was getting cold. As it turned out, they had started climbing Cat in the Hat and had accidentally gotten off route. After getting into some much more difficult climbing, they decided to do some intense downclimbing and rap off the route. As they were not on a standard descent route, they became stranded.

Analysis

Their equipment was on the lean side, and neither of them had a jacket. They had learned to climb in the gym and eventually progressed to trad climbing in Big Cottonwood Canyon, east of Salt Lake City. They owned a guidebook but had chosen to leave it at camp, thinking they wouldn't need it. Neither of them used auto-block back-ups on their rappels, so I rapped first to provide a fireman's belay from the ground. The landing was in a thicket of what seemed like holly bushes, so we gave the young lady one of our jackets so she wouldn't get too scratched up getting out of there. We all eventually made it back to our packs at the base of the climb.

Granted, this turned out to be a mild incident, but I believe today's climber can learn much from it. Outside of not wanting to carry the weight, I can't see why you wouldn't bring your guidebook to a place and route you've never done before. What college student doesn't have a cell phone and not carry it everywhere? Next time, take a picture of the route page in the guidebook.

The couple started the climb late in the day and had no extra layers or water with them. Their sparse rack might have limited their rappelling options as well.

After climbing for 35 years it's safe to say that I'm an old-school climber. Although it is purely opinion on my part, it seems that many of today's generation of climbers become great technical climbers while skipping many of the basics. Many come from the gym environment. Then they get their harnesses, shoes, belay devices, and rope and head out into the world of unforgiving gravity. If they drop a belay device from on high, they're stuck because no one ever taught them to improvise a body belay. It seems that many don't give a thought of carrying an extra 'biner or even a prusik cord to help them out in a jam. And as we know, all of us eventually get into a jam. Let's help each other out, folks, because it seems like we're raising a generation of 5.12 climbers with 5.5 knowledge of how to deal with the predicaments we find ourselves in while climbing. (Source: Edited from a report by Paul Spence.)

(Editor's note: We can suggest one benefit of not always carrying a guidebook: Every climb you do will feel like a first ascent. Learning how to figure out the route—and being able to downclimb when you have reached a point beyond your level—builds skill and confidence. Just be sure you have the gear and knowledge to get out of whatever predicaments climbing "blind" will get you into.)

Images

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