



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Falling Rock - Failure to Test Holds, Inadequate Belay

Humphrey's Ledge, Tree Keys

According to two reports, someone fell after the second bolt on Tree Keys at the Geriatric Walls on September 14. The belayer (age unknown) received significant rope burns on her hands.

As reported, the belayer lost control of the rope as the leader was falling when she tripped while trying to dodge rockfall. However, she then grabbed the rope above the belay device in order to slow the fall. She tried to get under the leader to cushion his fall with her body and keep him off the ground. The leader hit the ground, but was probably saved significant injury due to her efforts.

Analysis

I was involved in developing this area and helped put up these routes. This particular climb has reasonable protection and bolts up to about 30 feet. Then there is a 15-foot section of fourth-class scrambling, going through a chimney to a ledge, and up to the next bolt on a nose. The day following the incident, local guide George Hurley and I did this climb to try to determine what happened.

Just below the bolt on the nose was a place where a rock obviously had been pulled off the ledge. George spotted a fresh rock the size of a baseball on the ground near the belay stance. There are no gear placements up through the chimney scramble leading to this point. Our assessment is that a fall from below the bolt, prior to clipping this protection, would result in almost certain ground-fall—not to mention the leader would bounce off the slab at the start!

I had climbed that route a week before and had not noticed any loose rocks. That said, I don't pull outward on any rocks in a place like that, and I always test handholds before putting my full weight on them.

There was a tree right at the natural stance at the base of the climb with a comfortable place to stand behind and beside it. Had the belayer been there, she easily could have ducked behind the tree to avoid the rock

Images

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