



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock — Free Soloing, Off-Route

California, Tuolumne Meadows, Matthes Crest

Late in the afternoon on August 16, Bradley Parker (36) was free soloing the Matthes Crest ridge traverse (III 5.7) when he fell approximately 300 feet to his death. Several climbers witnessed his fall.

Earlier in the day, Parker and his girlfriend, Jainee Dial, climbed the Southeast Buttress of Cathedral Peak (II 5.6) as a roped team. When they returned to the base at 4 p.m. Parker went on to attempt the Matthes Crest alone. (This is a standard link-up for fit alpine climbers. He was training for the Evolution Traverse in the southern High Sierra, a difficult, grade VI, exposed ridge traverse.) Meanwhile, Dial hiked back to the trailhead; their plan was to meet at the trailhead between 6:30 and 7:30 p.m.

Parker passed two parties in the notch between the north and south summits prior to his fall. The first group stated later that Parker complained to them of dehydration and leg cramps; however, they noticed nothing in his movement or behavior that indicated distress.

Parker then passed Brian Martin (YOSAR member) and his partner. Parker mentioned to Martin that his climbing shoes were causing him hot spots (formation of blisters) on his big toes. He stretched for a couple minutes and then climbed past them. Both Martin and his partner described Parker as climbing competently, quickly, and fluidly as he followed the most popular route toward the north summit.

About 15 minutes after Parker passed them, at approximately 5:45 p.m., both the parties in the notch and two other teams at the base all heard a combination of yelling and something falling. They saw an unroped climber fall from the top of the ridge near the north summit. One of the climbers at the base, an off-duty paramedic, ran up the hill to where Parker had stopped, but he was obviously deceased. NPS personnel recovered Parker's body via helicopter short-haul the following morning.

ANALYSIS

Bradley Parker was an expert climber with around 15 years of experience. He had climbed big walls on El Capitan and Half Dome, and many routes in the High Sierra, and free climbed up to 5.12 and V8. He regularly free soloed easy routes in the Sierra, especially in the Cathedral Range.

According to Dial, Parker was in excellent physical condition. She further described his personality as energized yet calm and collected. Dial said that Parker sometimes had debilitating back spasms but had no other medical problems. When she initially reported him missing at 9 p.m. she was very concerned because he usually was so dependable.

On August 16 the weather at Matthes was sunny, clear, and calm. Although the climbers Parker passed said they heard him complain of cramps, dehydration, and possible blisters on his toes, there is no way to know if these ailments had anything to do with Parker's fall. None of the witnesses saw the start of his fall and none noticed any rockfall.

On August 19, I (Jesse McGahey) went to the scene with Brian Martin to investigate the accident.

From the ground, Martin described and pointed out the location of the start of Parker's fall. We could clearly see the initial impact area and where he had stopped, but saw no other clues along the probable fall line. Martin and I then climbed to the north summit. At the register we found that Parker had signed a 3" x 5" note card, which read "BP OG, beautiful sunset... Cathedral Matthes link up, w/Jainee (Mid-Aug 2014)."

We then climbed down to the approximate location from which he had fallen, a distinct "V notch" north of the north summit. Directly above the notch is a 5.8 downclimb of parallel cracks with good rock. If Parker had fallen while downclimbing he would have fallen to the east side of the Matthes ridge and not to the west—where he ended up. From the V notch most climbers then head north on the east side of the ridge on small ledge systems. For Parker to fall to the west he would have had to traverse a 10-foot-wide fin of steep, seldom travelled rock on the west face of the ridge. This way would be considerably more difficult, with more untested and loose handholds and footholds than on the standard route. Martin and I could see one potential rock scar about 6 inches long by a crack, where a hold could have broken. That said, there is no way to know if the hold broke when Parker grabbed it.

According to Dial, Parker had soloed Matthes Crest several times, possibly even a couple of weeks before his fall. However, one of the witnesses recalled asking Parker as he passed her party, "Which way does the route go from the here [to the north summit?]" and that he had seemed unsure, saying something to the effect of, "I think it goes up this way."

Parker was free soloing. Regardless of what occurred at the moment he lost control, without protection or helmet the 300-foot fall was unsurvivable. (Source: Jesse McGahey, NPS Ranger.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Jesse McGahey
Publication	ANAM
Volume	5
Issue	68
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Accident reports