



## AAC Publications

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### **Stranded – Inexperience, Darkness, Weather**

California, Half Dome, Snake Dike

**On March 8, Ryan Ellis (23), Kristen Elford (27), Charles Celerier (22), and Ken Langley (26) set out to climb the Snake Dike route (8 pitches, 5.7) on Half Dome, intending to take the cable descent from the summit.** The climbers were new to multi-pitch climbing, and this was Kristen's first climb outdoors. The team researched the route and asked friends for advice, and the weather was fair with warm days and cold nights. They started their hike from the Valley around 7 a.m., but got off-route on the approach, which cost them a little time. While hiking they did not see any snow or signs that there would be snow on the top of Half Dome.

Once at the start of the climb, the team decided to climb as a group of four, with one leader and the other three following each pitch. The climb went without serious incident; they were just slower than anticipated. The group was still on the climb as the sun set, and they got to the top in the dark. There they realized the summit area was covered in snow and ice, and they were unable to locate the cables, which were buried. They were stranded.

At approximately 9:30 p.m., Ryan called 911 to ask for a rescue. The park dispatcher informed them that rescue was not possible until morning. Keeping in touch with dispatch throughout the night, the group huddled and survived a cold, brutal night on the summit with minimal food and water and only two of them having warm clothes. The next morning two rangers climbed Snake Dike, starting their approach at around 5 a.m., and reached the stranded party around 10 a.m. The rescuers assisted the climbers in rappelling the route and hiking out to their vehicles.

### **ANALYSIS**

Charles did not remember checking weather for that week, but remembers the weather being nice. He also remembers getting advice from a friend who told him that the cables could be difficult to find, especially if they were covered in snow. (Snake Dike climbs the sunny southwest face of Half Dome, while the cables are on the much colder east face.) Kristen and Charles both reported that an earlier start could have helped their group succeed, and that climbing as a team of four presented problems of rope management, which slowed them down.

This is a good reminder to check with other climbers, climbing forums or online trip reports, and rangers for updated conditions on climbs. In the end, the climbers rappelled the route with rescuers, demonstrating that this was a possible way out of their predicament. Always be prepared to reverse a route if the descent is inaccessible or you can't locate it. Short days, limited knowledge of the seasonal conditions, and a lack of climbing experience resulted in a long, arduous day of route-finding and rope management, ending in being stranded in dangerously low temperatures. (Source: Kristin Anderson, Yosemite National Park Ranger.)

**Images**

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