



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Suspected Rockfall, Climbing Alone

Wyoming, Grand Teton, Upper Exum Ridge

On the morning of August 8, a solo climber sustained life-threatening injuries in a fall while attempting the Grand Teton. Steve Markusen (60) was climbing midway between the Friction Pitch and V-Pitch on the Upper Exum Ridge when the accident occurred. Two climbers in a separate party came upon Markusen, but did not have a cell phone to call for help. They continued to the summit of the Grand Teton, about 400 feet above, where they located other climbers with a cell phone and called the Jenny Lake Ranger Station. In the meantime, another party of two climbers encountered Markusen and began to provide first aid; they too placed a 911 call. They later reported the climber was passing in and out of consciousness and had various lacerations and possible fractures.

About an hour later, while the park's rescue operation was under way, a third climbing party with four firefighters came upon Markusen and the two climbers who were assisting him; two of these climbers had medical training and they stayed with Markusen to provide advanced medical assistance until park rangers arrived. Due to the threat of an approaching storm, all the other climbers continued to the summit so they could descend.

A helicopter flew seven rangers and a Teton Interagency Helitack Crew member to the Lower Saddle. Because of cloud cover high on the mountain, a ground-based rescue mission commenced. From the Lower Saddle, two rangers made a quick ascent with minimal gear to reach the critically injured climber and continue emergency medical care. Four additional rangers carried all the equipment necessary for a possible extended ground rescue. Fortunately, a break in the weather at around 2 p.m. made it possible for the helicopter to short-haul a ranger and a rescue litter to the accident site, and at about 3 p.m. a ranger and the victim were short-hauled from the site to the Lupine Meadows Rescue Cache.

Markusen's injuries were serious enough to warrant a Life Flight helicopter, but poor weather prevented this flight. Instead, Grand Teton rangers, emergency medical technicians, and paramedics set up a temporary emergency room inside the Jenny Lake Rescue Cache to stabilize Markusen before transporting him by park ambulance to St. John's Medical Center in Jackson. Markusen arrived at the local hospital at 4:20 p.m., over five hours after his fall. (Source: Jackie Skaggs, Public Affairs Officer.)

ANALYSIS

Although unable to recall exactly what happened, the climber believes he may have been struck by a rock from above, which caused him to fall or tumble approximately 100 feet down the steep granite slabs above the Friction Pitch. He was not wearing a helmet and incurred extensive traumatic injuries during his tumbling fall. He is lucky other climbers discovered him quickly.

Climbing solo and unroped in the mountains can be a dangerous game. Rockfall, loose ledges, and breakable handholds are characteristics of the Tetons. The Upper Exum is one of the most popular alpine rock climbs in the entire United States—with loose rock present, this creates a dangerous scenario for climbers below.

If this climber had been with a partner and roped up, with protection in place, his fall may have been

minimal. If you choose to climb alone and unroped, wear a helmet and make an effort to be among the first on the route, in order to minimize your exposure to rocks knocked off by other climbers. (Sources: Jackie Skaggs, Public Affairs Officer, George Montopoli, Incident Commander, and the Editors.)

Images

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