



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inexperience, Weather, Protection Pulled Out

Wyoming, Grand Teton, Lower Exum Ridge

On October 5, at approximately 11:15 a.m., a male climber (26) called Grand Teton dispatch to report that his partner (male, 39) had fallen and broken his leg while leading the first pitch of the Lower Exum Ridge. He stated they needed to be rescued. With high winds on the mountain, the party was informed that a helicopter rescue might not be possible and that they should attempt to self-rescue as far as possible.

Because of the severity of the terrain and current conditions on the route, including snow- and ice-covered rock, the rescue was anticipated to be complex. Five rangers and a helicopter were summoned to Lupine Meadows. After a recon of the lower mountain from the air, two rangers were dropped at the Lower Saddle and the helicopter returned to Lupine Meadows to be configured for short-haul operation.

The two rangers at the Lower Saddle made a short climb to the injured climber, who was located just below the chimney on the first pitch of the route. They arrived on scene at 1:48 p.m. At 2:30 p.m., after packaging the injured climber, the rangers requested a short-haul evacuation. The climber and a ranger were extracted at 2:42 p.m. and flown to Lupine Meadows, where the victim was transferred to an ambulance and taken to St. John's Medical Center in Jackson. The other ranger and the climber's partner rappelled from the scene and hiked down to the Lower Saddle, where they met the helicopter and were flown to Lupine Meadows.

ANALYSIS

The Lower Exum Ridge is rated 5.7. The route begins with some low-angle, blocky terrain just above the Black Dike before it transitions into a large, 120-foot 5.7 chimney. This first-pitch chimney is considered the crux of the route. Though this route is not considered difficult for a 5.8–5.9 climber, it can be outright desperate if not climbed in ideal conditions.

The two climbers left their camp at the Caves at about 3:30 a.m. with a plan to climb the complete Exum Ridge. Once they arrived at the Lower Saddle, they came to the conclusion that the entire route would not be feasible. Consequently, they made a plan to only climb the Lower Exum Ridge and exit down Wall Street.

The two made their way toward the base of the Lower Exum and began climbing the snow-covered ramp to the bottom of the first pitch at about 9:30 a.m. [Editor's note: A six-hour approach from the Caves Camp to the base of this route is quite slow, indicating poor conditions and perhaps a lack of fitness.] The first climber was leading in boots and crampons at this point. He had placed five or six pieces of protection in a diagonal crack and was working his way upward in the bottom of the chimney when he fell about six feet and was caught by his last cam placement. Unfazed by his fall, he got back on the climb and proceeded upward. He fell again, and this time the cam that caught his previous fall pulled out, causing him to fall much further—about 20 feet.

The climber couldn't recall exactly what caused him to fall for a second time. However, sometime during his fall he either caught his crampon on a rock or his crampon impacted the wall, causing his leg to snap. The victim called down to his partner and told him that he had broken his leg and could

not climb down. The partner immediately made a 911 cell phone call for help and initiated a SPOT beacon alert before he began to assist the victim down to the belay ledge.

Both men had been climbing three to four years and considered themselves to be competent on 5.8–5.9 traditional routes, with some mixed climbing experience. They were properly equipped to deal with a variety of conditions (snow, ice, and rock). Unfortunately, on this particular day, the rock on the route was covered with a light dusting of unconsolidated snow and no ice—not conditions for which they were suited. Rangers had conveyed the conditions on the route to the climbers the day before they left. They were also informed that, should they need a rescue, it could be greatly delayed due to lack of staffing and potentially unfavorable weather. It was by sheer coincidence that two seasonal climbing rangers, who had recently concluded their seasons, happened to be in the area of Lupine Meadows when the initial call came in and thus were available to help with the rescue. (Source: Chris Harder, Incident Commander.)

Images

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