Rappel Error, Stranded – Failed To Follow Direction

Colorado, Boulder, First Flatiron

On October 11, at approximately 7:15 p.m., several 911 calls came in to the City of Boulder Communications Center, stating that someone was yelling for help in the area of the First Flatiron. Temperatures at that time were in the low 50s (F), with light winds and clear skies. As emergency personnel began to stage near the base of the First Flatiron, Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) rangers were able to contact an involved person via his cell phone. This person, JG, was a member of a four-person climbing party, of which three were still on the summit. The leader of the climbing party, EW, had begun a rappel from the fixed eyebolt on the summit and had become stuck on the overhanging portion approximately 25 feet from the bottom of the 95-foot rappel. Due to the overhang and wind, those on the summit were unable to communicate effectively with EW. JG told rangers that he and his party on the summit had no headlamps, no food, and no additional clothing layers.

EW, 46, had a photocopy of route information from a guidebook that described three options for getting off the First Flatiron's summit: a single 95-foot rappel from the summit eyebolt; a short rappel from the summit and a second, slightly longer rappel from a bowl on the west face; or a low-fifth-class downclimb. EW mistakenly believed that all three options were steps in a single descent route.

When the party reached the summit at around dusk, EW tied two 60m ropes together, threaded them through the summit eyebolt, and threw both off the west face of the First Flatiron. One of the rappel ropes snagged on a flake about 50 feet above the ground when it was tossed from the summit, and in the darkness, without a headlamp, EW did not notice the problem until he had rappelled well below the flake, which caused the rope to jam in his belay device. EW knotted the free rope below his device to prevent any further descent, but he lacked prusiks, jumars, or any other means to travel back up his ropes.

Members of Rocky Mountain Rescue Group were able to lead up the nearby fifthclass descent route in the dark and reach the party stuck on the summit. Meanwhile, other personnel scrambled up the northwest face next to EW and built a high anchor and progress-capture system to pull the stuck climber over to the rock and conduct a "pick off" onto the rescuer's system. This successfully unloaded the jammed rappel line, which enabled the stuck climber to rappel to level ground. The other three members of the party and a Rocky Mountain Rescue member then used the previously stuck lines to rappel to the ground. The entire party was cold but uninjured.

Upon interview, EW stated he was an experienced trad climber (5.10/5.11), but had not been out regularly in several years, and had not climbed the First Flatiron in decades. EW said his group had begun their ascent of Fandango, a moderate multipitch route, at about noon and that he had led all of the pitches. Neither EW nor any other members of the party had anticipated how long it would take them to top out, and as a result had not brought sufficient equipment in the event they were benighted.

Analysis

The primary lessons from this incident are implicit in the report: 1) Get an early start for a long route; 2) research unfamiliar descents; and 3) carry the equipment necessary to ascend a rappel rope, particularly when making an unfamiliar rappel in the dark.

Every year many parties underestimate the length or difficulty of the 1,000-footplus east faces on Boulder's Flatirons. In March 2014, another party reached the summit of the First Flatiron after dark and was unable to rappel; rescuers reached them after 10:20 p.m. and assisted their descent. Another individual, a 22-year-old male, had to be rescued from the First Flatiron in February, after dark, after attempting to free solo the formation. Free soloing the Flatirons is popular, but the low-angle terrain can lure inexperienced climbers onto dangerous ground. In November a soloist fell from the 5.6 friction-slab crux of the direct east face of the First Flatiron, about 40 feet above the ground, and suffered serious injuries. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

Article Details

Author	G. Frain
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	68
Page	62
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Accident reports