



AAC Publications

Fall During Approach – Off-Route

Colorado, Boulder, Skunk Canyon

On November 8, my wife Becky (age 45) and I (Dave, age 35) were approaching the Angels Way route on Ridge Three in the Flatirons near Boulder. The weather forecast for the day was optimal, with highs in the lower 60s and no precipitation expected.

The description of the approach to Ridge Three through Skunk Canyon is minimal in online resources and in the guidebook we owned. As we made our way up Skunk Canyon, the faint climbers' trail ended in a small amphitheater with steep slabs, boulders and/or overhanging rock on all sides. Becky thought she saw a cairn at the top of a small gully, about 20 feet above us, on the southwestern side of the amphitheater, and proceeded to check it out. She climbed a short boulder on the northern side of the amphitheater and then traversed 15 feet south to the base of the gully. I followed her but was having a hard time making the initial boulder move, as the rope attached to my pack was catching on a small overhang.

Becky was out of sight when I heard her call my name; I assumed she was near the top of the gully. I then heard her scream and looked over in time to see her fall 20 feet to the ground, landing on her back, 10 feet from me. She did not lose consciousness but was gasping for air, lying on her back in a foot-deep pool of water. She was terrified. I was immediately concerned about a neck or back injury, but equally concerned about hypothermia if she stayed in the water, as it was still quite chilly and shaded in the canyon early in the morning. She eventually sat up on her own, and I made the decision to help move her from the water to a dry rock nearby. She slowly caught her breath but was confused about what had happened and how she had gotten to where she was. She had no numbness or tingling in her extremities, and her breathing appeared to be clear and free of liquid in her lungs, albeit labored and painful. Luckily, I had good cell service and was able to get a call to 911 to request paramedic and rescue assistance.

Fortunately, Rocky Mountain Rescue, the search and rescue team tasked with the Flatirons, was in the area that day doing weekly training. I exchanged texts with the dispatcher and was able to provide them with a relatively precise description of our location. They arrived within 45 minutes, did an assessment, and loaded Becky into a carrier. The terrain was steep and vegetated, requiring them to do three rope-assisted carries until the trail was wide enough to hand-carry her the rest of the way to the main trail and the ambulance. The extraction took close to 3 hours.

In the fall Becky incurred fractures to 21 different bones: seven ribs (two of which broke in two spots), her scapula, patella, and superficial fractures to 12 vertebrae. Two of her broken ribs punctured her left lung, which was collapsed by the time she arrived at the hospital. Despite not wearing a helmet at the time of the fall (it was attached to her pack), she luckily sustained no head trauma.

Becky does not remember clearly what caused her to slip or lose her balance, resulting in the fall; however, the gully did have some loose rock and may have been wet or slick with vegetation.

ANALYSIS

The climbing we encountered on the approach was well within our soloing capabilities—so much so that it never occurred to us that we might be off-route or that we should get out the rope and put on

helmets.

The Flatirons are notorious for convoluted approaches requiring good decision-making skills. It is important to remember that the approach can often be as much of a potential threat as the climbing route itself.

Having my cell phone with me and charged was an important component of this incident, as I was able to communicate with paramedics and search and rescue immediately and provide a precise location of where we were. I always carry a personal locator beacon but often carry my cell phone in addition. [Source: Dave Barnard.]

Editor's note: The approach to any route must be considered as part of the climb, especially when it involves exposure and risky positions. Climbers are often anticipating the climb ahead and can be distracted from the task at hand. The consequences of an errant move must always be kept in mind.

Images

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