



AAC Publications

Stranded – Late Start, Darkness, Failed to Follow Directions

Colorado, Eldorado Canyon, Redgarden Wall

My climbing partner and I (ages 33 and 30) arrived at Eldo early on March 29, intending to climb Swanson's Are te, a multi-pitch 5.5. We got to the base around 10 a.m. There was a very inexperienced party starting the first pitch of an adjacent route when we arrived. They were knocking down lots of rocks, so we waited for them before starting up the West Chimney approach pitch. My partner led the first pitch, and then a free soloist asked me if he could climb through, which I allowed. Due to all these delays, we were not both on the ledge from which the actual route starts until sometime after noon.

I had climbed other 5.5 routes in Eldorado Canyon, but Swanson's Are te felt significantly more difficult, which led to delays. We made it to the summit of Lumpe Tower around 7 p.m. In late March the sun was just beginning to dip behind the mountains, and the impending darkness created a sense of urgency. We reached a notch below the summit block and discussed our options. My partner had seen another party get ropes stuck on the Dirty Deeds rappel route, the closest descent path, earlier in the day. Because we had left the car so early in the day, I had not brought a headlamp, and we decided to avoid the Dirty Deeds rappel out of concern about getting a rope stuck with only one headlamp between us.

We decided to follow a mostly easy gully off the back of the peak. We assumed we would find the standard East Slabs descent from Redgarden Wall, and that we could belay each other if a downclimb looked questionable. (Editor's note: The East Slabs descent route is difficult to follow the first time one does it, even in daylight, and has extensive and exposed 3rd- and 4th-class downclimbing.) The gully took us to a clearing, and by this point it was night. We found cairns and continued to walk downhill until we cliffed out. We walked back up to the clearing and assessed our options. Two other directions cliffed out. The remaining side had a cairn that led us to a number of slings tied around a constriction, with rappel rings. We assumed this was a proper descent and made the rappel.

The mystery rappel placed us into a fairly flat, heavily vegetated area with steep walls on three sides. We explored this area in every direction and eventually skirted an exposed walkway to a similar but larger area. We continued downhill until finding extremely dense brush. In the dark of night, we could not tell if the brush was hiding a cliff. After exhausting all other directions, we settled into an open section, back uphill, and admitted that we were completely lost. We called for a rescue sometime around 11:30 p.m., giving GPS coordinates from our phone.

The search and rescue team arrived impressively quickly, told us we were in a "no man's land" section of Eldorado, and guided us through the descent, which involved some bushwhacking, a lower, a long rappel, more hiking, and a short rappel.

ANALYSIS

This incident was clearly the result of poor decision-making. First, I should not have left my headlamp behind. While lack of light was never an issue (the moon was bright, and we had one headlamp and cell phone lights), the fact that I did not carry my headlamp contributed to the decisions we made.

Second, when we were at the top of the second pitch, we realized we were behind on time. At this

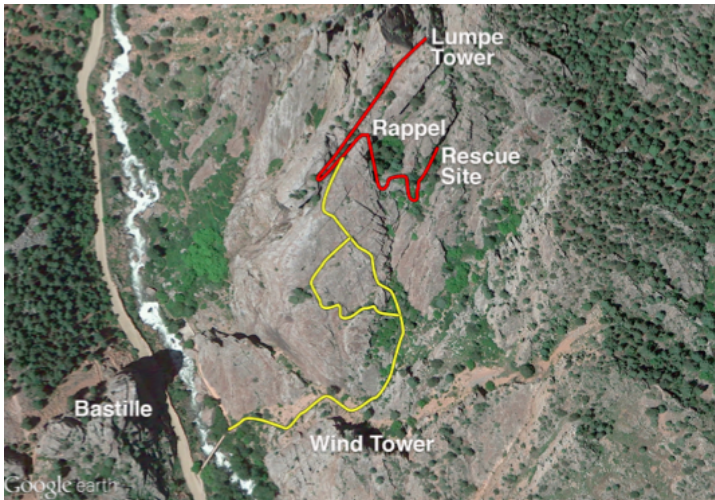
point we should have considered calling it a day and descending.

We made our biggest mistake upon reaching the summit. The guidebook listed three descent options, but made all of them sound tricky. We blindly followed the path of least resistance, assuming it would take us to the East Slabs.

We did do some things right. We both had down jackets and plenty of water. We were not in imminent danger. We also brought walkie-talkies, which made communicating with SAR easy once they arrived in the area. We were able to contact SAR and send them our exact location because we had a cell phone with us. (Despite seeing our location on Google Maps, we could not glean any useful information to aid in our descent.) Many online critics have second-guessed our decision to call SAR, but I still believe this was the right choice. I've always read that the best thing to do when you're lost in the backcountry is to stay put and wait for help. That's what we did. Had we continued to search for a way down on questionable terrain, it may have lead to a real accident with serious consequences.

(Source: Anonymous report from one of the climbers.)

Images



After climbing the west side of Redgarden Wall (top of image) and topping out on Lumpe Tower at sunset, two climbers who had never done the complex East Slabs descent got lost (red line) and called for a rescue at 11:30 p.m. The standard descent options (approximate) are in yellow.

Article Details

Author	Anonymous Report from One of the Climbers
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	60
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports