



## AAC Publications

---

### **Stranded – Poor Position, Stuck Rappel Rope**

Wyoming, Grand Teton, Stettner Couloir

**On the night of August 15, at about 8:45 p.m., Teton Interagency Dispatch received a cell phone call stating that six persons were stranded in the Stettner Couloir.** The subjects had climbed the Petzoldt Ridge and then rappelled into the couloir. They said that they rappelled through several waterfalls, were cold, and that their ropes were stuck. Due to the nature of the terrain and the onset of darkness, they were told that rescuers could not reach them until the next morning. The party was provided with strategies for both continued descent and for staying at their location and keeping warm.

At about 11:30 p.m., the incident commander recontacted the reporting party and learned that their group had joined forces with another party, and that they were now rappelling together. (The climbers were mostly in their 20s, with one group leader age 59.) The reporting party said she expected them to make it to the Lower Saddle that night, and two people did reach the Lower Saddle, where they were provided with sleeping bags for rewarming.

At about 5:45 a.m. on August 16, the incident commander received a text message from one of the party members stating that they were still stranded in the Stettner Couloir, that they were cold and wet, and that they needed rescue. Several rescuers climbed to the scene, and numerous others hiked and flew to the Lower Saddle to assist the subjects across the ledges at the base of the couloir. Eight people were evacuated out of the gully via rope rescue and escorted across the ledges to the Lower Saddle. Four of those individuals were flown from the Lower Saddle to Lupine Meadows because they were too incapacitated to hike out on their own.

### **ANALYSIS**

Although many of the climbers involved had reasonable amounts of experience climbing in the Tetons, they started the ascent late—the party of six arrived at the base of the Petzoldt Ridge around 9 a.m. There were about ten people in front of them, including one group of four or five people. They were repeatedly delayed by the parties in front of them and arrived at the top of the Petzoldt Ridge—still far below the summit—at about 5 p.m.

Once on top of the ridge, the group decided they were not going to continue to the summit (via the Upper Exum Ridge) due to the time of day. They had a discussion about descending via Wall Street (the normal descent from this location), but decided that they were uncomfortable descending that route. However, rappelling the Stettner Couloir proved to be a poor option because of wet terrain, stuck rappel ropes, and exposure to rockfall. The climbers did not have the skills to ascend their stuck ropes to retrieve them, and after fixing their remaining rope and remnants of two of the stuck ropes, they adopted unorthodox rappel techniques that could have proved disastrous (rappelling with two climbers on one single strand, one hanging from a tether beneath the other). Only two climbers were able to descend this way, leaving the others exposed to a cold night in wet clothing. When rappelling in lower-angle terrain with many obstacles, it's often better to do frequent shorter rappels, even if this requires building new anchors; full double-rope rappels greatly increase the risk of stuck ropes.

Researching the options for descent from a climb at various stages is as important as researching the ascent route. These climbers almost certainly would have been better off belaying each other across Wall Street and downclimbing the normal route to the Lower Saddle. (Sources: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report and the Editors.)

**Images**

Article Details

Author	National Park Service Search and Rescue Report
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	113
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports