



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Stranded – Off-Route, Inadequate Gear

Grand Teton National Park, Teewinot

At 7:30 a.m. on August 22, three women began hiking up the “Apex Trail” from the Lupine Meadows Trailhead in an attempt to climb Teewinot Mountain (12,325 feet). The three climbers, all in their mid-20s, were attempting to ascend the standard east face route, a route that Climber 2 had done once before. They were climbing in trail shoes and were not carrying a rope or harnesses, but each did have a helmet. The east face route is 4th class and is frequently climbed without ropes, but good route-finding skills and mountaineering experience are needed.

The women followed a well-established climbers’ trail to a point level with the Worshipper and Idol rock towers. According to Climber 3, they stopped here, had a snack, and put their helmets on. Somewhere above this point and before the Narrows, they lost the main climbers’ route and headed up to the north of the regular east face route. Believing they were now at the deep chimney adjacent to the Narrows, they climbed higher into steep, technical terrain at approximately 11,500 feet. They were now ascending a climb called the Black Chimney (5.6). They rock climbed several difficult pitches in their trail shoes. After climbing around two or three large chockstones in the chimney, they were about 250 feet above the last big ledge. The women traversed left, across a narrow sloping ledge, and became increasingly certain that they were off-route. According to Climber 3, they had seen another climbing group below going a different way. The group discussed returning and going that way, but they were concerned about downclimbing what they had ascended.

According to Climber 3, she was on a small ledge to the right (north) of Climber 2. Climber 1 was trying to find a way up steep rock above Climber 2. Climber 1 fell about 10 to 15 feet and hit Climber 2, and Climber 3 watched the two bounce over the rocks multiple times, then disappear out of sight over the cliff. Climber 3 downclimbed 15 to 20 feet of easier terrain to a larger ledge. At approximately 11:15 a.m. she called 911. She yelled many times but could not get a response from her friends. Both the climbers who fell died from their injuries. Climber 3 was short-hauled by helicopter from the ledge at 4:19 p.m.

ANALYSIS

It’s often easy to convince yourself that you’re on-route, matching terrain features to guidebook descriptions or memory. Had the climbers recognized that the increased difficulty they encountered meant they were likely off-route, they might have stopped, retraced their steps, and returned to easier ground before it was too late. More appropriate footwear, with sticky rubber soles, might have given them more confidence to downclimb and retreat. It is also not uncommon to utilize ropes and rock protection to ascend and descend the normal route on Teewinot, when the rock is wet, icy, or when climbers feel uncomfortable with the exposure. (Sources: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report and the Editors.)

Images

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