



AAC Publications

Pendulum Fall – Off Route, Inadequate Protection

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Nez Perce

On August 22, a 36-year-old female climber and her climbing partner left the Lupine Meadows Trailhead, headed for the south ridge of Nez Perce (III 5.7). The climber's partner (mid-20s) planned to lead the entire route. The two had met through Mountain Project and had never climbed together before.

The female climber believes that they were off route at various stages in the climb, and around the seventh pitch, the leader definitely got off route. In this area, the standard route makes a long traverse onto the east face of Nez Perce, avoiding a steep step that is home to the Garnet Traverse Variation (III 5.8). The leader reportedly began up the Garnet Traverse face before making a traverse back toward the east face. He was unable to protect this traverse. When the second climber arrived at this traverse, she broke a handhold and took a large, swinging fall to the right, using her feet and legs to protect her body from colliding with the rock.

The patient removed her climbing shoe from her right foot immediately after the fall and saw that three of her toes were black and blue. She was unable to replace the climbing shoe. She and her partner decided the easiest way off the mountain would be to continue up to the top and down the normal descent. The patient's partner continued leading, and the patient completed the remainder of the route in her approach shoes, experiencing significant pain. She and her partner then began descending the Northwest Couloir toward the South Fork of Garnet Canyon, making two rappels. After getting off route several times, they decided to bivvy at 11:30 p.m.

At around 8:15 a.m. the patient reached Teton Interagency Dispatch Center by phone and reported they were still about 500 feet higher than the South Fork. She could not assess whether she had good distal circulation, sensation, and motion, due to the pain and the cold night out. The caller said she would continue moving down and estimated it would take her one to two hours to reach the floor of the South Fork. She was asked to try to find a spot where she thought a helicopter might be able to land. The patient had to crawl, butt scoot, and crab walk to make slow progress downward.

Rangers Armitage and Edmonds flew into the South Fork of Garnet Canyon but were unable to locate the patient from the air. They landed and questioned other visitors, who advised them that the patient and her partner were down the canyon. The rangers hiked down to the patient's location, arriving at about 10:30 a.m. The rangers splinted the patient's foot and assisted her in hiking back up to the landing zone, from which she was flown to Lupine Meadows. Ranger Edmonds and the partner hiked to the trailhead together. (Source: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report.)

ANALYSIS

Rock climbs in the Tetons are notoriously difficult to follow from route descriptions and topos. The patient had spoken by phone with a ranger at the Jenny Lake Ranger Station several times during the day prior to the climb. The direct south ridge of Nez Perce has quite a long approach and descent and about 1,000 feet of technical climbing, making it a challenge to do in a day. This party's 7 a.m. start was late for such a significant outing. The fact that it was already evening at the time of the accident suggests the leader may have been feeling time pressure, possibly contributing to getting off route and failing to protect the traverse for the second. A predawn start would have given them more time to find the correct route and to get off the mountain once the patient was injured. (Source: The

Editors.)

Images



Nez Perce in the Tetons. The south ridge is prominent in center left.

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