



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Uneven Ropes, No Stopper Knots

Arizona, Oak Creek Canyon

On July 2, at 1:15 p.m., the Coconino County Sheriff's Office received a report of a climbing accident at Oak Creek Canyon Overlook. The report indicated that a climber had taken a 15- to 20-foot fall while on rappel.

Once responders reached the patient and initiated care, it was determined that a litter carry was not possible due to the location. A rescuer was lowered over the edge with a basket litter. The climber, who had sustained a back injury, was packaged in the litter and raised with the rescuer to the top of the cliff with a mechanical-advantage rope system.

It was determined that the climber was rappelling approximately 75 feet from the top of the cliff to the start of the climbing route Burnt Buns (5.8). He was rappelling with a doubled rope through an ATC Guide device. Prior to the rappel, he did not ensure that the rope ends were even or both on the ground. When he was approximately 20 feet above the bottom of the route, the end of one strand of the rope passed through the device, causing an uncontrolled descent to the ground, where the climber landed on his lower back. He was wearing a helmet and did not sustain any head injury.

ANALYSIS

The climber, who had decades of climbing experience, and his two younger and inexperienced companions did not ensure that both rope ends reached the ground so the rappel could be completed safely. Many climbers skip the step of tying stopper knots in the rope ends for single rappels like this one, but a solid knot would have prevented the shorter strand from slipping through the climber's rappel device.

Although rappelling to approach these climbs is common, a climber's trail also provides access. If at least one member of the party had walked to the base, he or she could have ensured that both rope ends were on the ground as well as provided a fireman's belay for backup in the event of a rappel error. (Source: Aaron Dick, Coconino County Sheriff's Office.)

Images

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