



AAC Publications

Stranded – Route-finding Errors, Inadequate Clothing

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Cathedral Traverse

On the afternoon of August 11, a 30-year-old male, Climber 1, and 23-year-old female, Climber 2, began an attempt on the Grand Traverse, a complex and challenging route linking ten Teton summits. Climber 1 had been climbing for about eight years, primarily bouldering and sport climbing, with minimal traditional and alpine climbing experience. In the Tetons, he had done the complete Exum Ridge on the Grand Teton. Climber 2 had been climbing for 10 years, with a strong sport climbing resumé but limited traditional climbing experience and no alpine experience. This was her first visit to the Tetons.

For this climb they brought standard rock climbing equipment, climbing shoes, and a 70-meter rope. Overnight gear included a tent, two lightweight sleeping bags, and food for four days and three nights. Personal gear included warm insulating layers and trail running shoes. Neither of them brought a rain jacket or rain pants.

The Cathedral Traverse from near the top of Teewinot. (A) Grand Teton. (B) The Grandstand. (C) Mt. Owen. (D) Peak 11,840'. Photo by Rolando Garibotti

In three days they climbed over Teewinot and Mt. Owen and made it to the Grandstand at the base of the north ridge of the Grand. They were moving much slower than expected due to the complexity of route-finding and the constant exposed climbing in unfamiliar terrain. They realized that they could not complete the Grand Traverse but were hoping to finish their trip on the fourth day by climbing the north ridge of the Grand Teton, descending the Owen-Spalding Route, and then walking down from the Lower Saddle.

It rained overnight, and they woke to light rain and poor visibility. They decided to attempt the north ridge (the crux of the Grand Traverse, 5.8 and approximately 10 pitches) despite the poor weather, because, in their minds, it was the only way off the mountain. Route-finding was difficult due to limited visibility, and the climbing was increasingly difficult amid rain and snow showers. They were losing dexterity in their fingers and toes, and at one point, Climber 1 took an estimated 40-foot fall but was able to complete the pitch. Higher on the route, snowfall began increasing. On August 14, at approximately 4:30 p.m., Climber 1 called the Teton dispatch center and was transferred to SAR coordinator Gordon Fletcher.

Fletcher had a brief discussion with the distressed party, attempting to determine their location in relation to the Second Ledge, which is an exit to the Upper Saddle. They were unaware if they had passed or had yet to arrive at Second Ledge. Ranger Fletcher explained that, due to current weather conditions, it was unlikely that rescue personnel could get to them that night and they would need to find a way to stay as comfortable as they could until morning.

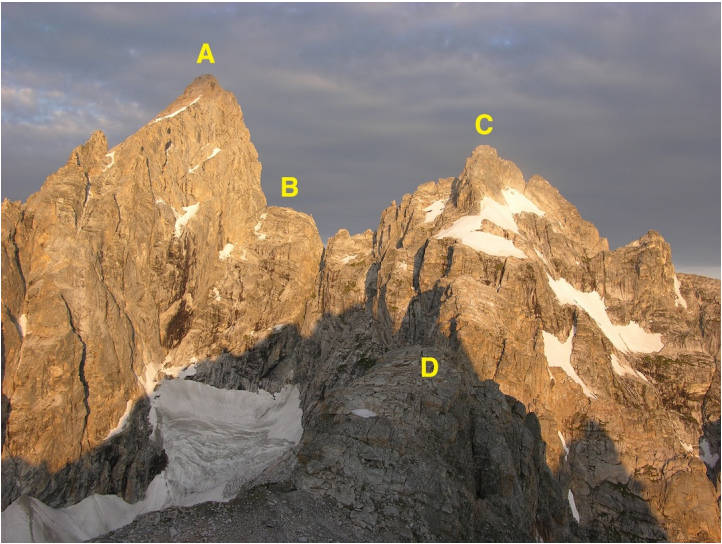
Rangers at the Lower Saddle reported light snow and strong winds, with accumulating snow at the Upper Saddle. At 6:20 p.m., rangers Phil Edmonds and Vic Zeilman began to ascend toward the Upper Saddle with climbing and rescue gear, with the idea of crossing the Second Ledge to see if they could make contact with the distressed climbers. However, the climbing conditions were too hazardous and they returned to the Lower Saddle. The climbers reported they were able to rappel to a ledge and get in a tent, and they spent the night there.

On the morning of August 15, the climbers were still wet and cold, but the clouds had lifted, the sun was coming out, and they could see the Grandstand an estimated 300 feet below them. Two rappels brought them back to the Grandstand, at 12,600 feet, where they called ranger Fletcher again to report their location. Due to the length and challenge of the coming descent and the climbers' current physical and mental condition, it was determined that it would be best if they were extracted from the Grandstand. By midday, after several helicopter flights, rangers successfully short-hauled both climbers from the Grandstand to Lupine Meadows. (Source: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report.)

ANALYSIS

The Grand Traverse is easy to underestimate because of its modest technical grade. Ample experience with Tetons climbing and alpine route-finding should be a prerequisite to attempting this linkup, and reconnaissance of key sections, including planning for escape routes, will help ensure success. Rain gear is essential for any climb in the Tetons, no matter how good the forecast. (Source: The Editors.)

Images



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