



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Off-Route

Colorado, Elk Mountains, Capitol Peak, Northwest Buttress

On July 23, a female climber (25, 15 years of experience) and her male climbing partner (24, six years of experience) were climbing the Northwest Buttress route (IV 5.9) on Capitol Peak. By simul-climbing most of the route, the pair was able to reduce the total pitches from 13 to eight.

On the seventh pitch, the climbers encountered a 5.7 roof with loose blocks, which they had expected based on photos and route beta. The female climber took the lead, moving up the low-angle face and placing a few pieces before the roof. She noticed a few small rocks being knocked off by the rope above her belayer, so she moved left in hopes that rockfall would not hit her partner. She placed a number 0.3 Camalot X4 and stepped up approximately five feet to reach the roof. As she made her first move onto the roof, some blocky rocks collapsed and she tumbled down along with head- to computer-size boulders.

The belay held, but the climber's right foot was pinned beneath some of the fallen rocks. She trundled the rocks off her foot and was able to stand on the slope. Her belayer lowered her to a flat spot and they taped up abrasions and lacerations on her fingers, arms, and face. Although in pain, she was able to continue climbing with the injured ankle. The pair finished the route and descended via the standard northeast ridge (Knife Edge) route, staying roped up for the fourth-class sections.

ANALYSIS

Capitol Peak is known for loose rock, even on the relatively solid Northwest Buttress. The leader may have climbed into an area of the roof that was less stable than the more frequently climbed section a few feet to the right. Instead of moving off-route, the team might have been able to relocate the belay or link pitches to protect the belayer from potential rockfall. However, they said, they were belaying from bolted anchors and had limited options. The climber knocked on the blocks in the roof prior to stepping up and said they seemed sufficiently stable. "Besides being super-cautious, I'm not sure how else the accident could have been avoided," she said. (Source: Anonymous report from the climber.)

Images

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