



AAC Publications

Capitol Peak Fatalities – Off-route, Inexperience

Colorado, Elk Mountains, Capitol Peak

An unprecedented five fatalities occurred within a six-week span on 14,137-foot Capitol Peak, one of Colorado's most challenging 14ers. The mountain's standard route, the northeast ridge, is a 17-mile round trip concluding with an exposed stretch of 4th-class rock.

On July 15, Jake Lord (25) fell at least 160 feet between Daly Saddle and K2, a subsummit of Capitol. Lord and his climbing partner, Peter Doro, were not on the standard route but instead following a nearby ridge that is often taken in error. Lord was climbing over a large boulder when it came loose, causing him to fall. Doro climbed down to Lord, called emergency services, and began CPR. The patient was dead by the time Mountain Rescue Aspen (MRA) volunteers arrived at the scene about two hours after the call.

On August 6, Jeremy Shull (35) fell approximately 200 feet from the east side of the ridge between K2 and the Knife Edge, the 4th-class crux of the climb. Shull, an experienced climber, was with three friends, but he was ahead and out of sight when he fell. He fell into a "crevasse" and was confirmed dead later that day by an MRA volunteer. The recovery effort, postponed several days by bad weather, was extensive and dangerous due to the location of the body.

On August 22, the bodies of Aspen couple Carlin Brightwell (27) and Ryan Marcil (26) were found at the base of the north face of Capitol. They were last seen in late morning of August 20, very near the summit. It's not known what caused their fall, but according to Jesse Steindler, a deputy with the Pitkin County Sheriff's Office, the couple may have tried to descend an alternative route from the top.

On August 26, Zackaria White (21) fell approximately 600 feet while descending the mountain. White and his climbing partner, Brandon Wilhelm, had argued over which route to take down the mountain. White, with little previous climbing experience, wanted to try an apparent direct descent from the top down a gully to the north. Wilhelm, who had climbed 42 of Colorado's 14ers, advised against leaving the standard route and warned White that the shortcut would cliff out. The pair separated before the Knife Edge around 4:45 p.m., approximately an hour after reaching the summit, and White began to descend the gully. Wilhelm continued down the standard route and reached Capitol Lake around 7 p.m. He searched for White until he could no longer see in the darkness. White's body was found the next day.

ANALYSIS

Four fatalities had occurred on Capitol Peak over the preceding 14 years before the spike in 2017. Capitol Peak is not a beginner climb and should not be attempted unless the climber has extensive Class 4 mountaineering experience. Climbers should build their capability patiently, creating a solid foundation of experience. Climbing with an experienced mentor or hiring a guide service can help with skill development and understanding personal limitations.

As many as four out of the five climbers who died on Capitol in 2017 were off-route, demonstrating that an important step in preparation is to thoroughly research the planned ascent and descent. In addition to printed guidebooks, resources such as 14ers.com provide extensive route information, photos, and comments on route-finding and current conditions from fellow climbers. From the top of

Capitol Peak, it appears there is a more direct route back to Capitol Lake, the start of the climb. According to Justin Hood, president of MRA, this descent becomes progressively steeper on loose talus and scree, ending with an unavoidable 300-foot cliff band. It can also be very difficult to return this way once climbers realize they cannot continue down.

Most climbers attempting Capitol do not bring harnesses, rope, and a rack. But with loose rock and high exposure, the consequences of a misstep are high. Knowledgeable climbers can safeguard the most exposed sections of this climb with a short rope and very little additional equipment.

Along with appropriate experience and preparation, climbers must use good judgment. "Everyone is in charge of their own decisions," said MRA's Hood. "Oftentimes, there is an expectation that you have to summit, because you took the time off of work, got on the plane, rented the car, lugged the equipment and camped, and want the Instagram shot. If you can be in the moment and let go of your expectation to summit, you will make better, safer decisions."

To respond to the increase of mountaineering accidents in the region, the National Forest Service, MRA, and Pitkin County Sheriff's Office are organizing workshops to educate climbers on mountain safety. Partnering with Aspen Alpine Guides and Aspen Expeditions, they will focus on techniques that will help climbers navigate the unique hazards of the Elk Mountains. See mountainrescueaspen.org.

Images

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