



AAC Publications

Stranded on Descent – Off-Route Fatigue

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, East Ledges

On two days in a row in early June, YOSAR responded to climbers stranded after failing to make their way down the East Ledges descent from the top of El Capitan, which requires a mix of rappelling and scrambling.

The first party had climbed the East Buttress route on June 2 and attempted to follow the “Option C” descent shown in the popular Supertopo guidebook. However, this descent requires two ropes to rappel and the team only had one. After one rappel, the party found a two-bolt rappel station and assumed they were at the correct location. They pulled their single line and committed to that descent. After rappelling again, they became stranded on a ledge.

The team had cell phone service and called YOSAR. Due to the late hour, they were instructed to wait on the ledge for rescue in the morning. Two YOSAR members responded to the East Ledges and assisted the party down.

Later that same day, two more East Buttress climbers were stranded on the East Ledges rappels. They had followed rock cairns and a faint climbers’ trail leading toward the edge of El Capitan. At some point the team found a manzanita bush with webbing and rappel rings and began rappelling from that location. At the end of the first rappel, they found bolted rappel anchors at a ledge, which led them to believe they were on the standard rappel route.

After pulling their single 60-meter rope, one member of the party rappelled down 30 meters only to find there were no more rappel stations on the blank face. He used prusiks to ascend the ropes to his partner, but the terrain above them was far beyond their ability to climb back up to the rim.

The next morning, two SAR-sitters climbed up the East Ledges, located the two climbers, and gave them a tutorial on how to use ascending devices. The climbers then ascended a fixed rope with a belay from above.

ANALYSIS

The climbers involved were experienced in multi-pitch climbing, but had never descended off El Cap. They told SAR personnel that they were tired after climbing their routes and that haste played a big factor in these incidents. Slow down and think things through toward the end of the day. When fatigue has set in, it is easier to make mistakes.

When rappelling into unknown terrain, it is imperative to continuously analyze your situation. If you observe that you would be unable to climb back up the terrain you’re rappelling, be certain you can continue down with the equipment you have before pulling the ropes above you. (When you commit to climbing with only one rope, your descent options are severely limited. If you are not familiar with a descent, consider bringing two ropes the first time. Even though guidebooks show a number of options for rappelling the East Ledges, only one option is possible with a single rope.) Often, leaving gear to create your own rappel anchors is a feasible option.

When continuing down is impossible, it’s important to know the techniques for ascending ropes. The

climber in the June 3 incident had these skills and was able to spend the night on a ledge as opposed to hanging at the end of a rope. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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