



AAC Publications

Leader Fall On Rock – Off-Route

Colorado, Eldorado Canon, Redgarden Wall

On October 20, Alex Kissinger (28) and I (27) started up the Yellow Spur (six pitches, 5.9+). At around 4 p.m. we reached the top of the fourth pitch, where the belay stance is a small, exposed ledge no bigger than a small nightstand table. There are two variations for the fifth pitch, according to the guidebook and Mountain Project: You can go straight up a piton/bolt ladder to a headwall leading into the next pitch (5.9+/10a) or go up to the first piton then move out left to the more moderate but exposed “Robbins Traverse” (5.7+ PG-13), or so I had understood the options. [Editor’s note: The guidebook actually says to climb to the first **bolt** before starting the Robbins Traverse.]

I started leading the fifth pitch, climbing an arête for 10 to 15 feet, and clipped the first piton I saw. I had read that if taking the traverse variation it’s best to extend the runner on the first piton to reduce rope drag. I clipped the piton with a double-length sling, then backed up the piton with a number 1 Metolius Ultralight Master Cam a foot to the left in a horizontal crack. I double extended the cam as well to reduce any form of rope drag. I then moved left into the exposed traverse.

Immediately, the climbing was more insecure than anything we had done on the lower pitches (up to 5.9+). I slowly moved up and left, then made three or four moves to advance five vertical feet. I scanned for protection placements, but there were none. I started to feel fatigued, saw what looked like a shallow, chalk-dusted horn up to my right, just beyond a static reach, and committed to throwing for it. I missed.

What I remember next is the feeling of free fall, air quickly filling the top of my chest, then a second later I opened my eyes and was hanging next to Alex, slightly below the belay ledge. I saw blood on the wall beneath me and on my hands. I had fallen 30 to 40 feet and was unconscious for three minutes. Alex tells me that I fell on him, hit the small belay stance, then slammed against a wall before I was arrested by the rope. The back of my helmet was cracked. According to Alex, once my fall was arrested, I started convulsing for around 30 seconds, then my body went limp as I hung from my harness 10 feet below him.

Alex extended his anchor tether and managed to pull me up next to him and clip me to the anchor. He used his shirt to apply pressure on my head and reduce the bleeding, and he called 911 and yelled to other climbers at the base of the wall to do the same. At around 6:30 p.m., Rocky Mountain Rescue Group rappelled in and began to help us down. We reached the ground at around 9:30 p.m. With assistance I was able to walk out of the canyon.

I was diagnosed with a concussion, intracranial hemorrhage, a large laceration on the back left side of my head, which required 14 staples to mend, and a puncture wound in my left calf. I recovered fully.

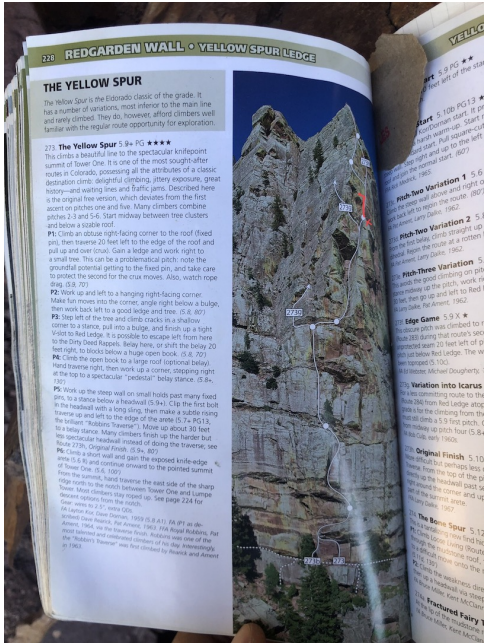
ANALYSIS

Before any route, especially a traditional multi-pitch route, no matter how classic or well-traveled, always do as much research as possible to prevent getting off route. I now know that I moved left for the traverse way too early. This lack of due diligence was the cause of my accident. I am very grateful for my partner’s quick reaction and for keeping me alive, and to the volunteers of Rocky Mountain Rescue Group for getting me down. I am also glad I was wearing a helmet, which undoubtedly saved

me from a more serious head injury or potential death. (Source: David Rozul.)

Editor's note: It's easy to fall into the trap of forcing off-route climbing to match a guidebook description, and therefore it's important to stay alert for signs you've wandered off the line. In this case, the lack of chalk, lack of protection, and unexpected difficulties each could have been red flags on such a well-traveled, reasonably protected climb. When the "off route" signs start flashing, it's better to downclimb to a stance, regroup, and study the alternatives than to go for it and hope for the best.

Images



The Eldorado Canyon guidebook marked (in red) to show the climber's off-route variation to the Yellow Spur route.

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