



AAC Publications

Rockfall On Rappel – Darkness, Haste

New Mexico, Organ Mountains, Pyramid of the South Rabbit Ear

Rappelling the second pitch of the route King Slut (5.11) in the Organ Mountains is an absolute nightmare. In November, I (male, 34) was rappelling on a single 70-meter, 7.8mm half rope with a second rope on my back. Before I began navigating down a 100-foot vertical cactus garden, I tied an autoblock and knots in the end of my rope, because objective hazards were apparent and abundant. With the sun setting, I was trying to move fast and link rappels, skipping the anchor atop the first pitch, but as I rappelled over an overhang, I realized the rope ends were dangling 10 feet above the ledge where the climb had begun. This ledge sits above a 150-foot approach slab, so I couldn't risk downclimbing the remaining 10 feet to the ledge—a fall would likely be fatal.

I decided to ascend the ropes by simply pulling up on the rope strands and pulling the slack through my ATC. After one such attempt, the rotten lip of the overhang, over which the ropes were running, broke off and hit my left hand (my brake hand). I estimate the rotten mass of granite that crashed against me weighed 50 to 60 pounds, falling about five feet before hitting me. I immediately realized that my thumb was shattered, but I wasn't sure if other bones were broken. I never lost control of the ropes with my brake hand. If I had, the autoblock should have prevented a fatal ground fall.

With blood pouring out of my smashed thumb, and the autoblock already tied, I quickly set a cam in an adjacent rotten crack, clipped into it, set a fist jam with my non-broken hand, got my feet on a positive stance, and removed the ropes from my ATC. I yelled up to my partner, Dan Carter (male, 36), that I had shattered my thumb and could not make it to the ledge. He quickly rappelled down to the anchor I had skipped, threaded the ropes, and rappelled past me to the ledge. I put myself back on rappel and descended to the base of the climb. Ultimately, we were able to self-rescue, and I drove myself to an emergency room in Las Cruces.

ANALYSIS

There were a few factors that contributed to this accident. The most significant element was that it was getting dark, which made it difficult to assess the rock quality at the lip of the overhang. The pending darkness also motivated me to move faster than would be prudent in such conditions. Since I was so close to the bottom of the climb, I didn't take the time to pull out my headlamp. The second contributing factor was my increasing frustration with the horrible rappels, due to the cactus, scrub oak, and loose rock.

Luckily, I did tie an autoblock for this rappel. Even though I never let go of the ropes after I got hit, the autoblock allowed me to quickly find a stance and set an intermediate anchor. Ultimately, there is no valid reason not to tie an autoblock. (Source: Brandon Gottung.)

Editor's note: The old saying "slow is smooth, smooth is fast" applies here. Frustration with the conditions led to haste, which led to the decisions to link two rappels and to forego a headlamp.

Images



The Rabbit Ears formation in the Organ Mountains, showing the approximate location of an unusual rappelling accident.



Rappelling from King Slut before the accident in the Organ Mountains.

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