



AAC Publications

Fall During Descent – Inexperience, Inadequate Gear

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Symmetry Spire

On June 12, at about 9:30 p.m., rescue coordinator George Montopoli received a call about an accident in the descent gully (southwest couloir) on Symmetry Spire. The caller informed Montopoli that he and his climbing partner had left the valley at about 7 a.m. and reached the base of the southwest ridge route (5.7) at about noon, when they ate all their food. They completed the climb and rappelled to the col at the top of the couloir at about 9 p.m. Although the reporting climber had an ice axe and was able to descend the steep, hard-packed snow in the couloir, his partner had left his axe at the base of the climb and was forced to downclimb exposed rock and scree to the west of the snow. A short distance down from the col, the partner slipped and fell about 30 feet along a steep rock step. He then tumbled down rock and scree into trees that prevented him from reaching the snow and falling further. He suffered a broken right ankle and broken left fibula.

A two-member hasty team, followed by three additional rangers carrying heavier rescue and support gear, responded to the accident scene, located at an elevation of about 10,200 feet. Steep, firm snow in Symmetry Couloir (the approach to the spire) necessitated the use of ice axe and crampons for around 2,000 vertical feet. The hasty team arrived at about 1 a.m. and provided medical attention, warm clothing, shelter, and food to the two climbers, who had not packed for spending the night outdoors. The ambient air temperature was approximately 30°F. The second group of rescuers arrived at about 2:40 a.m. and continued support for the two climbers. The following morning, the two were extracted from the scene, one at a time, by helicopter short-haul. (Source: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report.)

ANALYSIS

The two male climbers (both 18 years old) had inadequate inexperience for such a route, and this showed in many ways: a relatively late start, a slow approach and a long time spent on the route, inadequate food and gear for a big day (including no extra gear for an unexpected night out), and the fateful decision to leave one ice axe at the base of the climb, even though a snowy descent obviously was in store. Online research and/or a preclimb chat with the rangers at Jenny Lake can provide a wealth of information—it's up to climbers to use it well. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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