



AAC Publications

Stranded – Unable to Retrieve Rappel Rope

Wyoming, Wind River Range, Cirque of the Towers, Wolf's Head Peak

At approximately midnight on September 1, Sublette County Sheriff's Office dispatch received a call from a couple of climbers (male and female) who were stranded on the northwest face of Wolf's Head, not far below the summit. Their rappel rope had become stuck during their descent, after climbing the classic east ridge. The climbers reported they had supplies to spend the night on the three-foot ledge they were on, but would need assistance in the morning.

At first light on September 2, Tip Top Search and Rescue helicoptered to the area with a short-haul team, and the crew dropped an additional rappel rope, a team radio, water, and extra food to the climbers, as the stranded male was a Type 1 diabetic. The two felt they were in good enough condition to self-evacuate with the supplies given. Tip Top's short-haul team landed in a nearby meadow to monitor the descent in case they needed further assistance.

Over the next couple of hours, the two became disoriented and struggled to continue. They had lost a bag with personal gear and medical supplies required for the male's diabetes. His medical condition was beginning to worsen, and his climbing partner was able to communicate the change in status with the awaiting search and rescue team. The short-haul team rigged the helicopter, and despite high, swirling winds on the cliff face, successfully brought both members off the mountain to the meadow below. The helicopter subsequently flew all parties out of the mountains. (Source: Sublette County Sheriff's Office.)

ANALYSIS

This is a good example of the "snowball effect" that can compound the seriousness of relatively small problems. It's not known when the party reached the summit, but darkness and fatigue undoubtedly contributed to their stranding. Before attempting remote alpine routes, it's essential to acquire the skills and carry the equipment to recover a stuck rope, either by ascending the rope or by climbing back to the rappel anchor. Since they were unable to do either, they were forced to spend the night at around 12,000 feet, which contributed to the need for a helicopter rescue in the morning.

Note that these climbers and at least one previous party on Wolf's Head were able to contact authorities in Pinedale by mobile phone. However, this should be considered a rare anomaly—there is no reliable cell service in most parts of these mountains. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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