



AAC Publications

Stranded – Storm, Darkness, Inexperience

Colorado, Sangre de Cristo Range, Crestone Needle, Ellingwood Ledges

On Friday, June 21, two climbers from Kansas (ages 23 and 30) drove up to the east side of the Sangre de Cristo Range. Their goal was the Ellingwood Ledges (a.k.a. Ellingwood Arête) on the east side of Crestone Needle. The 2,000-foot route ends at the summit of the 14,197-foot peak.

The next morning, under sunny skies, they started climbing at 9 a.m. via the route's direct start. Their iPhone weather app showed a forecast of "partly cloudy with a 20% chance of showers." Enjoying warm weather and dry rock, the duo made good time cruising the easy 5th-class pitches at the bottom and the grassy and rocky 3rd- and 4th-class ledges in the middle of the route. However, at the route's crux, just a few hundred feet below the summit, the 5.7 to 5.9 cracks (depending on exact route) were filled with ice. Clad in rock shoes and with no ice axes, they couldn't climb past the thin ribbons of ice. Meanwhile, the sky turned gray as, unbeknownst to the pair, a strong winter-like storm was barreling in from the west.

Around 4 p.m. the storm hit, with intense snow showers along with thunder and lightning. The pair put on their light fleece jackets and waterproof jackets. With visibility dropping to 30 feet, they kept trying to climb, thinking safety would be gained by going over the top and descending the standard route. (The 3rd-class normal route up and down Crestone Needle is exposed and tricky to follow, and has stranded climbers even in the best weather.) Eventually, realizing they could not go up, the pair called the Custer County Sheriff's Office to request assistance. It was about 5:30 p.m.

Custer County Search and Rescue (CCSAR) began planning for a possible technical rescue. The climbers started down, building rappel anchors and occasionally downclimbing, a descent they described as "terrifying." They made steady progress and continued to give updates to CCSAR. (Cell service is very good high on the Crestones.) At approximately 9:30 p.m. and at 13,030 feet, soaked and shivering hard, and nearly out of gear to build anchors, the pair grew concerned their fatigue could affect their safety if they continued. In a call with CCSAR, a senior member told them not to continue down if they were not completely confident in their anchors. They decided to stop and wait for morning on a snow-covered ledge about as wide as a lawn chair.

Given the complexity of the situation, CCSAR began planning a parallel rescue effort: one ground-based and another by helicopter hoist. Members of various other rescue teams started toward the area to help, and a line of communication was opened with the Colorado Army National Guard (COANG).

High on the mountain, light snow continued to fall until about 1 a.m., and then, as the skies cleared, the temperature dropped into the lower 20s (F). Their sodden clothing froze hard and their joints turned stiff. They had found no gear placements, so they had no anchor. Afraid to even stand up for fear they might fall, they stayed put. The two were so miserable and scared that they each called parents and siblings to say good-bye, thinking they might die before sunrise.

By 3 a.m., rescue teams started to arrive at CCSAR's base in Westcliffe. An hour later, over 20 mountain rescuers from four counties were hiking toward the base of Ellingwood Arête. All the while, CCSAR liaised with the National Guard to coordinate a helicopter extraction utilizing two Alpine

Rescue Team hoist rescue technicians. Weather conditions were questionable, and it was not until well after sunrise that the helicopter mission became a “go.” After a 130-mile flight, Black Hawk 529 out of Buckley Air Force Base arrived overhead at about 9:45 a.m. and determined a hoist insert and extraction was possible.

Two rescue techs were lowered to the stranded climbers. Other than being very cold, stiff, hungry, and thirsty, the climbers were in remarkably good condition. The morning sun had thawed and dried their clothes, and warmed their spirits. The two were helped into rescue harnesses, and when the Black Hawk returned, the climbers and rescuers were hoisted two at a time and flown to CCSAR’s base in Westcliffe. By 2:45 p.m., all the ground teams had returned safely to Westcliffe, ending a 22-hour mission.

ANALYSIS

The two climbers were capable multi-pitch crag climbers who aspired to do their first alpine or big-mountain route. They had the skill to climb this route in summer conditions; however, the preceding winter had been one of Colorado’s snowiest in many years. Though the calendar said late June, snow and ice on the high mountains was similar to mid-May. The arrival of the storm only worsened the situation.

The storm had been well forecasted for the mountains, but the pair did not get the right forecast. Many phone apps present weather for nearby towns, so the climbers got the forecast for Westcliffe, located in the valley to the northeast of the mountain. Then they typed in “Crestone” and another benign forecast popped up—however, this forecast was for the hamlet of Crestone, low in a valley on the west side of the peak. Seeing two good forecasts, the climbers were confident. But there was a very different forecast for the peaks 6,000 feet higher. [Editor’s Note: 14ers.com links to NOAA spot forecasts for each of the Colorado 14ers.]

The climbers had a good alpine rack but left nearly all of it as they rappelled and downclimbed nearly 1,000 feet of snow-covered rock and grass. In their packs they carried shell jackets, beanies, gloves, and good socks—barely enough protection. They climbed in rock shoes and carried light trail shoes for the descent. In a typical summer, these shoes would have been fine, but had they reached the summit, their descent off a very snowy and icy Broken Hand Pass would have been difficult.

To their credit, these climbers kept their wits and survived a miserable night in a very exposed spot. They tried very hard to self-rescue and did a phenomenal job to descend as far as they did.

The role of luck—good and bad—plays a much larger role than we often acknowledge in such situations. In the Sangre de Cristo Range, the weather cleared soon after midnight, leaving the climbers with drying conditions. Further north in Colorado’s central and northern mountains, the storm continued all night, and upwards of two feet of snow fell. These two put themselves in a place to be lucky when they wisely decided to stop. Surviving a miserable night is always easier than **surviving a fall**. (Sources: Dale Atkins, Alpine Rescue Team and Colorado Hoist Rescue Team, and Jonathan Wiley and Patrick Fiore of Custer County SAR.)

MAKING THE CALL: CELL PHONES AND RESCUES

In the Crestone Needle rescue, the ability to maintain two-way communications with rescuers was critical. The stranded climbers not only could call for help, they also were able to discuss their situation with rescuers, and the conversations with rescuers and family helped keep them motivated during a long, cold night.

To preserve battery power, rescuers instructed the pair to limit outside calls. Too often, people who call for help start calling other people as well, draining their battery and leaving rescuers with no way to stay in touch. (It should go without saying that batteries shouldn’t be wasted on Instagram or

checking email.) This pair limited their calls and preserved one phone throughout the night.

It's not just battery life that's at stake in deciding who to call in such a situation, because an accident in the mountains affects many people. Unsure they would survive the night, the two climbers called their families to say "good- byes," an experience that caused huge swings in emotions. At one point, a family member's call went to voicemail, and only hours later did one of the climbers answer another call and report that both were still alive. To unexpectedly be talking over a phone to a loved one who is sure they are on the verge of death generates a level of fear and sadness that is difficult to describe. Fortunately, these climbers and their families got a second chance.

— Dale Atkins

Images



Crestone Needle after a June storm. Icy cracks halted two men high on Ellingwood Ledges (the central buttress). After descending much of the route, they huddled overnight on a small ledge (red circle) before rescuers could reach them.

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