



AAC Publications

Ledge Fall – Inadequate Protection

Colorado, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, North Chasm View Wall

Around midday on October 5, a male climber fell approximately 25 feet while leading Stoned Oven, a multi-pitch 5.11+ climb on North Chasm View Wall. The climber fell on easier terrain after completing an airy traverse on the sixth pitch of the ascent, and he hit a right-facing ramp, sustaining a leg injury that was later determined to be a displaced distal tibia-fibula fracture.

Around 1:30 p.m., park visitors reported they had heard yelling for help from inside the canyon. The climbing ranger, Tom Schaefer, directed a ranger on the opposite rim of the canyon to use binoculars and a spotting scope to locate the injured climber and his partner. They determined that the climbing party was self-rescuing to the bottom of the canyon by rappelling the route, with the injured climber using only one leg. Schaefer attempted to contact the party from the rim with a megaphone but was unable to establish communication. He activated the volunteer SAR team and began to prepare a rigging plan to assist the climber out of the canyon if necessary.

Schaefer and two volunteer SAR nurses met the climbing party as they reached the bottom of the canyon around 6 p.m. The injured climber was unable to walk, making it impossible to hike out via the Cruise Gully. At this point, a decision was made to conduct a rope raise of the injured climber the next day. The two SAR nurses stayed overnight with the climber, providing gear, medical care, and pain management. The next day, 25 volunteers from Black Canyon SAR, Ouray SAR, Rigging for Rescue, and Crested Butte Mountain Rescue assisted with the rope raise.

At 7 a.m., a Dual Capability Twin Tension Rope System was set up on the rim, using two 360-meter ropes followed by two 180-meter ropes. While the injured climber and SAR team sheltered under an overhanging cave feature, some loose rock was cleaned off the lower portion of the route. The litter was then lowered to the bottom and the injured climber hauled to the rim. The entire operation took six hours, with the raise itself taking two hours.

ANALYSIS

The climber fell a long way on easier terrain, and he later acknowledged he should have placed another piece to minimize the potential fall. Due to the technical terrain and remoteness of the Black Canyon's rim, response times can be elongated. There is no cell phone reception, and even personal locator beacons may not function properly inside the narrow canyon. The only ways rangers can track who is in the canyon is the self-registration wilderness-use permit system. A large majority of rescues in the canyon are reported in late afternoon, and most inner canyon rescues require overnight patient care while a rescue plan is organized and conducted the next day. The lesson is that a conservative approach is required while climbing in this environment. (Sources: Tom Schaefer, climbing ranger, and the injured climber.)

Images



The Black Canyon is about 1,800 feet deep in the area of North Chasm View Wall. Once the haul system was organized, it took two hours to raise the injured climber and a rescuer from the bottom.

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