



## AAC Publications

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### **Fatal Ground Fall – Miscommunication, Lowering Error**

Colorado, Clear Creek Canyon, Other Critters Area

**On June 6 at 12:56 p.m., the Alpine Rescue Team responded to the report of an 18-year-old female climber who had fallen at the Other Critters area.** Initial reports indicated the climber had fallen a significant distance and was unresponsive. While Alpine was en route, Clear Creek County EMS personnel were able to access the fallen climber and confirm she had not survived the fall. It was estimated the climber had fallen a total of 160 feet.

After the evacuation of the fallen climber, two climbers from Alpine Rescue were able to access the route (Labby, 5.9 sport) and recover the climbing gear still on the wall. The members noted the climber's anchor setup was appropriate, all quickdraws were placed properly, and no equipment failure was observed.

In conjunction with the Clear Creek Country Sheriff's Office, Alpine Rescue was able to reconstruct the events leading up to the climber's fall.

Somewhere between 9 and 10 a.m., Climber 1 and Climber 2 arrived at the Other Critters area with the intent of climbing several routes. Their first route was a three-pitch bolted 5.6 called Yellow Dog Dingo. Prior to leaving the ground, the pair discussed a system to manage the belays. Climber 1 would lead each pitch, and after an anchor was properly established, the leader would tug on the rope two times as the indication to Climber 2 to take her off belay and prepare to climb. The pair agreed to this system based on the crag's proximity to busy Highway 6 and their fear that verbal communication would be difficult. Climbers 1 and 2 successfully climbed all three pitches of Yellow Dog Dingo with this system and then rappelled to the base of the route, where they had left their backpacks.

Climber 1 suggested they climb Labby next. The route starts on a wide ledge to climber's right and above the start of Yellow Dog Dingo. Climber 1 set up to lead the route. The plan for the route was identical to the system previously used: Two rope tugs meant Climber 1 was safe and Climber 2 should take her off belay and prepare to climb. Climber 1 believed Labby to be another multi-pitch route, and she left the ground with the intention of tying in to the anchor and belaying Climber 2 to the top. However, upon reaching the anchor, Climber 1 realized Labby was only a single-pitch route (about 80 feet high). Climber 1 attached her anchor slings to the bolts and clipped her end of the rope to the master point. It's unclear if any verbal communication to Climber 2 was attempted. Climber 1, thinking she was still on belay, sat back on the rope to be lowered and fell.

From Climber 2's belay position, she could not see Climber 1 at the anchor and was under the impression Climber 1 would belay her to the top. After Climber 1 disappeared from view, Climber 2 felt two tugs on the rope. Based on the system they had agreed to use, she took Climber 1 off belay. As Climber 2 was tying herself into the rope, she heard a scream and saw Climber 1 fall.

Based on the above reconstruction, it is likely that Climber 1 pulled up on the rope as she set up the anchor for lowering. Having no view of the anchor and not hearing any verbal communication, Climber 2 felt these rope pulls and interpreted them as Climber 1's signal to go off belay.

### **ANALYSIS**

It's important to highlight several oversights by the climbers in this tragic accident. First, had the pair known Labby was a single-pitch route, they might have chosen a different rope management system. Records indicate the pair had consulted Mountain Project prior to climbing Labby but failed to identify it as a single-pitch climb. Second, a non-verbal system for belay management during multi-pitch climbing is useful, but relying solely on rope tugs can lead to problems. Movements in the rope such as clipping, climbing, and constructing an anchor can be misconstrued as off-belay signals. Combined, these mistakes led to the fatal accident. Such incidents reinforce the importance of double-checking the belay before lowering by testing the system with body weight before you unclip from the anchor, especially if you cannot hear or see the belayer below.

Accidents such as this have more than one victim that requires attention. The American Alpine Club offers resources to survivors through the Climbing Grief Fund. Additional information can be found at [americanalpineclub.org/grieffund](http://americanalpineclub.org/grieffund). (Sources: Paul "Woody" Woodward, Gerrit Padgham, and Curt Honcharik, Alpine Rescue Team.)

**Images**

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