



AAC Publications

Lightning Strike – Multiple Patients

Colorado, Devils Head, Chicken Head Ranch

June 30 was a normal busy summer Sunday at Devils Head. We started the day on the west side of Chicken Head Ranch to avoid the hot June sun. Toward midday, we moved to the east side, and as usual in the summer, it started to cloud up. We climbed Wishbone Dihedral as the weather started to break down, leaving the rope hanging in case it didn't rain. We had a party of four, and as we waited, two other parties of two came over to the east side of Chicken Head Ranch.

All eight members of the three climbing parties refrained from climbing as the storm brewed to the southwest. As the storm drew closer, but before any rain or hail started, there were several lightning strikes within 500 feet. It was the worst lightning I had experienced in my 45 years of climbing. It was difficult to determine a safe place to be, as there were many tall trees and the crag nearby. Initially, several of us stayed away from the crag, but as the rain, wind, and hail intensified, everyone moved back toward the rock. There were five of us by Wishbone Dihedral, and the other three were about 50 feet to the north by Crystal Key. The lightning hit us at about 3 p.m.

Slowly coming back to my senses, I realized what had happened as I saw two people pass out and fall into the bushes and one other person who was unconscious. I called out to others nearby that they should call 911, thinking they would be unaffected, but they too had been hit as the current fanned out from the top of the crag. I made my way to the phone in my pack and called 911, giving the details of our location and condition to the operator. **[Editor's Note:** The author of this report is one of the main route developers at Devils Head and wrote the local guidebook.] **Once I was convinced the operator knew we were on the "back" of the mountain and not on the popular hiking trail to a re tower, we ended the call.**

Everyone was now conscious, but a couple members of the party had obvious issues, especially Sandy, who was standing behind me initially and could not speak. Jody had a bloody nose and was somewhat dazed. The rest of the group were collecting themselves and gathering warm clothes for everyone, as massive hail, rain, and wind continued to pummel the group. Now that it was clear there were people capable of tending to those less well off, I decided to run back to the parking lot to ensure a SAR team could find us. Another member of the group joined me for the 20-minute trip back to the car.

When we reached the parking lot, a Jackson Creek fire truck and one SAR vehicle already had arrived. I confirmed our group's location and the need for at least one stretcher with the SAR team and then raced back up to Chicken Head Ranch with an EMT from Jackson Creek Fire Department. When we reached the group, Sandy was doing a bit better, but had an injured shoulder, and everyone was very cold. When a larger SAR team arrived, Sandy was carried out in a litter, while everyone else hiked out under their own power. Back in the parking lot, we were checked out by paramedics and released, except for Jody and Sandy, who were taken via ambulance to nearby hospitals. Sandy ultimately had surgery for a torn ligament in her shoulder, possibly from falling after the lightning strike. Jody had a treatable eye injury.

ANALYSIS

A call to 911 within minutes of the lightning strike and great performance by the first responders helped the injured get to safety relatively quickly. Looking back, it would have been advisable not to

move back toward the crag, which stood above the treeline and was hit by the lightning bolt. I had looked for a sheltered spot away from the crag and tall trees, but this was a massive storm with 150 ground strikes in 30 minutes in our area. There really was nowhere safe. I think the biggest takeaway is to stay 50 feet from a lightning target even if it means getting really wet and cold. (Source: Tod Anderson.)

Images

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