



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Long Runout, Inadequate Protection

New Hampshire, Cannon Cliff, Moby Grape

At 11:30 a.m. on September 15, Liam Kirkpatrick (20) and his partner were climbing Moby Grape (8 pitches, 5.8 PG-13) on Cannon Cliff. The 5.7 fifth pitch of this route wanders, and from the traditional belay stance it is not possible to see the leader. Kirkpatrick took an unexpected fall and dislocated his elbow. (At the time, he believed he had broken his arm.) He communicated to his partner, who began lowering him. Then Kirkpatrick dropped again—another 30 to 45 feet. Due to the ensuing confusion, neither is sure if the slack resulted from a piece pulling or if the rope had snagged over the many bushes on the wandering, slabby pitch and suddenly popped free.

In the course of the second fall, Kirkpatrick landed on the ledge near his partner. In addition to the dislocated elbow, Kirkpatrick suffered an acetabular hip fracture and seven fractured vertebrae. Members of New Hampshire Fish and Game, Pemigewasset Search and Rescue, and Mountain Rescue Service took the nearby ski-resort tram to the top of the cliff to respond, and several parties lower on the route climbed up to the injured party. A New Hampshire National Guard Black Hawk helicopter lowered a guardsman and litter, retrieved Kirkpatrick, and transferred him to Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. This was the first helicopter pick-off of an injured climber on technical terrain in New Hampshire. (Sources: New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, Venkata Damaraju, Liam Kirkpatrick, and the Editors.)

ANALYSIS

Cannon is a very large alpine cliff with loose rock, ledges, wetness, and vegetation. Even the most popular routes have unavoidable runouts and sections where falls will have serious consequences. The fifth pitch of Moby Grape is not difficult but is difficult to protect. The low angle makes for especially dangerous terrain in the event of a fall. Though Kirkpatrick—an experienced climber for whom Moby Grape felt comfortable—can't remember why he fell, it is probable he slipped on the pitch's hardest move, ascending a short slab with poor protection. In run-out terrain, the main thing protecting the leader is his or her movement skills. Concentration, careful movement, and testing holds are paramount, as is striving to ensure that every piece is solid and extended where necessary to minimize shifting. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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