



AAC Publications

Fatal Scrambling Falls

Colorado, Torreys Peak, Kelso Ridge

In separate incidents, two climbers fell to their deaths from Kelso Ridge, a popular 3rd-class scramble up 14,267-foot Torreys Peak, west of Denver. An experienced 71-year-old alpinist was reported missing on July 16 after he failed to return from a climb. His body was located two days later at around 13,600 feet; he had taken a fatal fall from high on the ridge. On September 28, a 24-year-old man with much less experience in the mountains got off-route on the ridge climb and attempted to scramble up a steep, loose rock step (low 5th class). He took a long, tumbling fall and did not survive.

ANALYSIS

Kelso Ridge (the northeast ridge of Torreys Peak) gains more than 1,500 vertical feet from the saddle below, with short stretches of hand-and-foot scrambling. Although ropes are rarely used on the route, portions have significant exposure, along with the usual hazards of loose rock and rapidly changing weather. In recent years, with a surge in popularity of climbing Colorado 14ers, more people attempt Kelso Ridge and some of them underestimate the difficulty of 3rd-class climbing.

Dale Atkins of the local Alpine Rescue Team said the number of calls for help on this route has increased dramatically. He commented, "We've noticed on Kelso Ridge (and with the 3rd-class Sawtooth Ridge between Mt. Bierstadt and Mt. Evans) that novice to intermediate peakbaggers who are comfortable hiking easy summits think the difference between class 2 and class 3 is the same as the difference between class 1 and 2. They're capable of pulling themselves up 3rd- and 4th-class terrain, but they have no experience in how to read terrain to find the easier route, or to anticipate what a gully might do, or anticipate where not to go." Attempting such routes with experienced mentors is the best way to acquire these subtle skills. (Sources: Published reports, Dale Atkins, and the Editors.)

Images

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