



AAC Publications

Loose Rock — Weather, Seldom-Climbed Route

North Carolina, Hanging Rock State Park, Moore's Wall

On May 27, following a two-week period of heavy rain, a pair of experienced (>20 years each) climbers planned to do the popular route Break on Through (5.10a) on the Circus Wall of Sentinel Buttress. The route begins from a ledge approximately 60 feet up an adjacent wall; to reach the start, climbers ascend easy 5th-class terrain on the Egg Wall or the Sentinel Chimney. On this day, both of the usual approaches were soaking wet with runoff. However, the climbers noted a large dry streak on the Egg Wall, along or near a seldom-traveled route known as Scrambled Eggs (approximately 5.6). Above them, Break on Through was almost completely dry and judged to be climbable.

Climber 1 led the pitch to the ledge and built a solid belay anchor. Climber 2 was following the pitch, approximately 30 feet off the ground, when he reached a rounded fin of rock that he needed for a handhold to clear a small overhang. The hold appeared to be an integral part of the wall, but since it was clear that the recent rains had loosened some holds, Climber 2 tested it by partially weighting the hold overhead and bouncing with his body weight. He felt some movement in the rock, tested it again, and felt no further movement—since he was on easy ground, he judged it was safe to continue.

As he moved off his stance, the rock gave way and a piece approximately 14 inches square and weighing about 25 pounds hit him on the head (he was wearing a helmet), knee, and finally on the top of his right foot.

Despite his foot injury, Climber 2 was able to traverse about 50 feet to a rappel station on an adjacent route, protecting the traverse using the gear on his harness. Climber 1 followed the improvised traverse, and then both climbers rappelled and hiked out. An urgent-care visit and X-ray diagnosed a fracture of the first metatarsal. (Source: Climber 2.)

ANALYSIS

Substantial wet weather or freeze-thaw cycles may cause seemingly solid holds to work loose. These experienced climbers understood the potential impact of heavy rain on the variable quartzite at Moore's Wall; they altered their usual approach to avoid wet rock, and they tested suspect holds. After feeling the hold move when he tested it the first time, the climber might have tried to find an alternative line to avoid committing full weight to this hold. Yet this might have led him onto other seldom-climbed terrain, with other loose holds.

"It's easy to forget at popular areas, where the classics have 40 years of traffic and little loose rock, that wandering even just a few feet off the beaten path can lead to a first-ascent-like experience, in terms of rock quality," Climber 2 said. "We often free solo a clean and well-traveled easy section of this wall as an approach pitch, so it's tempting to treat the whole wall as a foregone conclusion. That led to a case of experienced climbers not adjusting expectations to current conditions." (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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