



AAC Publications

Strandings — Inadequate Protection, Inexperience

California, Tahquitz Rock

Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit (RMRU) performed multiple rescues on Lily Rock (a.k.a. Tahquitz Rock) during 2020. Two of the incidents involved climbers underestimating routes and calling for help when they became stranded.

On May 5, a leader ran out of protection while attempting to link pitches three and four of Whodunit (a.k.a. Hoodenett, 5.9). The leader felt that his last placement (a number 4 nut) was inadequate to protect a fall and did not feel that downclimbing was a viable option. Because the climbers were linking pitches with a 60-meter rope, they did not have enough available rope to lower the leader. The belayer was on a large ledge, but the leader was stuck on a small shelf protruding about four inches from the wall.

The pair activated 911 at about 6 p.m., and Riverside Sheriff Aviation Unit Star-9 helicoptered ropes and technical gear to the top of the route for members of the RMRU, who descended to the stranded climbers. Working throughout the night, RMRU assisted each climber down the cliff safely.

In the evening of December 5, RMRU responded to another pair of climbers who became stranded, reportedly after the lead climber had “run out of rope and protection” near the top of El Whampo (a five-pitch 5.7 route). An RMRU team was inserted at the top of the cliff by helicopter in a nighttime operation. The two climbers were located, uninjured but separated, with the leader about 150 feet below the end of the technical climbing and the second 150 feet farther down. A member of the team was lowered from the summit area to reach the leader, and both were hauled to the summit, and then the process was repeated with the second climber. After the climbers were rewarmed, they and the RMRU team members were flown from the summit. Everyone was back at the team’s base by 3 a.m. (Source: Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit.)

ANALYSIS

Tahquitz (officially Lily Rock, according to the USGS) and neighboring Suicide Rock attract climbers of various levels. The ratings of these traditional routes are considered “old school,” and many climbers have underestimated the difficulty of classic routes. Adequate research, planning, and protection are necessary before setting out, particularly when attempting a multi-pitch climb during the very short days of winter. A generous rack and/or careful rationing of protection are necessary to safely link pitches on a sustained rock climb, or else the leader may run out of protection (or, more likely, the right sizes of protection). In the Whodunit incident, a rescuer who was carrying a complete rack was able to construct a solid anchor at the point where the leader had been stranded. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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