



## AAC Publications

---

### **Long Leader Fall – Protection Pulled Out**

Colorado, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National park, North Chasm Wall

**On the morning of June 2, a party of four descended the Cruise Gully to attempt Scenic Cruise, a 13-pitch 5.10d trad route on the North Chasm Wall. The group planned to climb as two parties of two.**

While leading pitch five, a long 5.10 finger and hand crack, one of the climbers fell about 50 feet, as two pieces of protection pulled out of the crack. The climber suspected a broken ankle, and both parties initiated self-rescue to the base of the climb.

Around 1 p.m., one of the climbers from the injured party began to ascend the Cruise Gully to get help, and he happened to run into a climbing ranger conducting routine work in the gully. The ranger climbed to the North Rim to retrieve first-aid equipment and establish communications channels, and then returned to meet the climbers at the bottom of the canyon.

With the injured climber stranded in the canyon at the base of the climb, there were two rescue options: a 1,600-foot rope raise of the injured climber by the Black Canyon of the Gunnison volunteer SAR team or a short-haul helicopter rescue by Mesa Verde Helitack. After confirming their availability, Mesa Verde Helitack arrived on scene and conducted a reconnaissance flight around 4:30 p.m. The ranger and the three remaining climbers carried the injured climber to an opening in the center of the gully. After reconfiguring at the South Rim's helipad, Mesa Verde's Bell 407 and short-haul spotter and attendant successfully lifted the injured climber to the North Rim for the first-ever short-haul rescue in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

#### ANALYSIS

The Black Canyon is known for extreme temperature swings and can be very hot in midsummer. Early June was warmer than the seasonal norms in 2020, and the Scenic Cruise route is in full sun. It's certainly possible the difficult conditions and/ or haste contributed to the leader's fall and to inadequate placements on this sustained but well-protected pitch.

Over the last few seasons, more parties have been climbing in bigger groups in the Black, which is not recommended. There is an abundance of loose rock on these walls, even on the trade routes, and the likelihood of parties below being hit by rockfall is significant.

Luckily, there was enough rope for the belayer to lower the injured climber to the belay, and then the second pair's rope expedited self-rescue. Many pitches in the Black Canyon are 50 to 60 meters long, and climbers should be prepared to handle scenarios that would not allow lowering of the leader.

Due to the technical terrain and remoteness of the inner Black Canyon, rescue response times can be elongated by several hours or into the next day. The only escape to the rim from the bottom in this area is the Cruise Gully, which involves 5.7 climbing (there are two fixed rappels for the descent). If a party is unable to ascend this route, the only rescue options are a rope raise (which usually must take place the following day) or a helicopter. While the new short-haul helicopter program is a great resource, Mesa Verde Helitack may be on other assignments or the weather and conditions may not allow for a short-haul rescue.

In summary, it is not easy to get out of the canyon if injured. Black Canyon climbers need to come

**prepared and approach routes with a conservative mentality.** (Source: Tom Schaefer, ranger, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.)

## Images



The first-ever short-haul helicopter rescue from the base of the Black Canyon. Because of limited helicopter availability and difficult conditions, climbers cannot count on a speedy short-haul rescue from this deep canyon.



Helicopter preparing to haul an injured climber from the bottom of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

## Article Details

Author	Tom Schaefer, ranger, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports