



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Off Route

Idaho, City of Rocks National Reserve

In the midafternoon of May 31, rangers at the City of Rocks National Reserve received word that a 67-year-old female climber had fallen while rappelling from Jackson's Thumb and had reportedly broken her ankles. She and her partner had ascended Theater of Shadows (5.6), a four-pitch, 400-foot bolted climb, and while rappelling from the top, she descended below the second rappel station and into a cleft between the Thumb formation and an adjoining wall.

Upon realizing her mistake, she began to climb back up to the second rappel station to regain the normal rappel line. While ascending, she neglected to pull the accumulating slack through her rappel device. At some point she slipped and fell 15 to 20 feet, striking her feet against the wall and injuring her ankles. The climber was able to arrest her fall and maintain her position while her partner rappelled to the ground along with two climbers from another party, who then provided a fireman's belay to assist her down a lower-angle slab to the base of the face.

At 3:42 p.m., rangers Ryan Buffington and Savana Jones made contact with the injured climber, who was sitting at the base of the Jackson's Thumb rappel with one obviously angulated and fractured ankle and the other severely sprained. They provided first aid and splinted both ankles. EMS personnel, rangers, and volunteer climbers then carried her a considerable distance down the descent gully and over the access trail to a point where she was transported from the scene by Life Flight helicopter.

ANALYSIS

Many climbs at City of Rocks and Castle Rocks require one or more rappels for descents. Knowledge of the number and location of rappel stations is critical. While many climbs at both parks can be done with a 60-meter rope, this is not always the case; plus, some descents may require a diagonal rappel or tension traverse to link stations.

When relocating during a rappel—either because an anchor was missed (as in this incident) or because the descent requires moving between stations—it is often reasonable to protect yourself by maintaining the rappel as you move across low-angle terrain. A third-hand backup should be used, and care must be taken to address any slack that accumulates by pulling it through the device as you move. This should only be done on very easy ground, because it is difficult to manage the ropes and climb at the same time. (Sources: Stephen King, ranger at City of Rocks National Reserve, and the Editors.)

Images



Jackson's Thumb showing the location of the two rappel anchors (X) and the spot where a climber accidentally rappelled too far and fell (arrow). After her injury, other climbers helped her continue the rappel into the gully at right.

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