



AAC Publications

Leader Fall — Loose Rock, Inadequate Protection

Montana, Gallatin Canyon, The Watchtower

On August 23, Eric (64) and his climbing partner Ed (57) were planning to link the standard route up the Watchtower (5.8) with Silver Foxes (5.8) on the Watchtower's upper tier, and then finish on Spare Rib (5.8), all traditional lines on the east side of Gallatin Canyon. Both are experienced climbers. Ed led the pitches on the Watchtower and the first two pitches of Silver Foxes. The two then decided to do the alternative third pitch of Silver Foxes (5.6) instead of the standard final pitch of 5.10a/b. This pitch starts on a large ledge where a belay anchor is not needed. The variation appeared as though it was not climbed frequently.

At about 1:30 p.m., Eric started to lead. About eight feet above the belay, he came to a block that, after testing, seemed solid. Using the block as a hold, he went for the next hold with his other hand and the block pulled loose. Eric pushed the block away from Ed as he fell, and, having placed no pro, dropped to the belay ledge. Landing on a sharp rock, he suffered a deep ten-inch laceration on his right calf and fractured his fibula. He tried standing up, but realized the injuries were too severe to get back down without additional help.

Ed, who is a paramedic, bandaged Erik's leg with climbing tape and webbing and moved him into the shade, anchoring him to a large tree. At 2 p.m., Ed gave Eric some food and water and left to call for help. By 2:35 p.m., Ed was at the Lava Lake emergency call-box on Highway 191 and placed a 911 call. A party of two overheard Ed phoning for help and offered to climb up to Eric while Ed waited at the parking lot. Ed gave the couple a large roll of gauze that he obtained from his car, and they climbed the first two pitches of Silver Foxes to access Eric, then used the gauze to help control the bleeding from the laceration. Eric was spotted by a Gallatin County Search and Rescue helicopter at approximately 4 p.m. and was short-hauled from the site in a litter.

ANALYSIS

The two climbers noticed that the variation seemed infrequently climbed, which could have alerted them to the possibility of loose rock and the need for greater care with the holds. In loose terrain, placing more protection should be considered, especially close to the ground or a ledge. In places where there is no cell phone coverage, a satellite communicator can dramatically speed response time if emergency assistance is needed. (Sources: The climbers, Gallatin County SAR, and the Editors.)

Images



Rescue helicopter hovering above a patient on the Watchtower in Gallatin Canyon.

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