



AAC Publications

Rockfall – Severed Rope

New Hampshire, White Mountains, Cannon Cliff

On September 20, Ben Kessel (34) and Emma Leigh Donahue (30s) were climbing Moby Grape (8 pitches, 5.8 PG-13) on Cannon Cliff. Both were active within the MIT Outing Club and experienced rock climbers. Conditions were windy but pleasant, and there had been no rain for days. As is common on summer and early fall weekends, multiple parties were climbing the route; Ben and Emma were the first, and highest, party. Kevin Soleil and Bill Moriarty were climbing as a separate party just below and left of Ben and Emma throughout the day and witnessed this accident.

Ben had climbed the route before and was informally mentoring Emma, who was new to Cannon. They swapped leads and most of the climb went uneventfully, although they did have some difficulty managing rope drag at places and Emma took one short fall. Around 3:30 p.m., Emma reached the top of pitch seven after taking a slightly different route than the most commonly climbed line. (The upper pitches of many climbs at Cannon present route-finding challenges as the angle gradually lessens.) At about 3:45 p.m., as she was belaying Ben up to her stance, a block estimated to be the size of a refrigerator became dislodged about 50 feet below the belay and fell directly toward Ben as he approached from below. The rock slid over their single rope, severing it and knocking Ben off the route into a long free fall.

At the time of the incident, Kevin had just reached the top of Kurt's Corner, an alternate finish about 75 feet to the left. Kevin heard Ben shout "Rock!" and he got a brief glancing view of the rock falling. Emma, Bill, and another climbing party below who overheard the incident promptly called 911. New Hampshire Fish and Game and Pemigewasset Valley SAR personnel were subsequently notified and began their response toward both the base of the cliff and the summit area.

After the rockfall stopped, Kevin quickly belayed Bill to his location and they traversed to Emma's belay stance to provide assistance. Together, the three carefully rappelled down to search for and try to help Ben. They took care to avoid the immediate rockfall site to prevent dislodging any additional material. At 5:30 p.m., Emma located Ben on a ledge about 150 feet below the rockfall site among some small, dense spruce trees. Kevin soon also reached this site. Ben had not survived the fall.

Kevin, Emma, and Bill ascended their ropes, and responders reached the scene at 6:15 p.m., with only about 30 minutes of daylight remaining. Given the impending darkness, they focused on assisting the uninjured climbers to the top of the cliff before night fell and temperatures dropped. Early the next morning, responders from New Hampshire Fish and Game, Mountain Rescue Service, and Pemi Valley SAR completed the recovery.

ANALYSIS

Cannon is a large alpine cliff subject to both climber-triggered and spontaneous rockfall. The current Cannon guidebook (Sykes, 2017) describes the recent history of specific rockfalls and climber accidents in detail (pp. 180–186). In 1968, a climber died while placing a piton behind a block, causing it to fall onto him. In 1988, two climbers were killed when the rock supporting their belay anchors failed, causing them to fall to the ground. In 2006, a climber was severely injured when a block he was standing on released and caused a long fall (see ANAC 2007). While spontaneous natural rockfall is common, the only known incident of natural rockfall resulting in a climber injury was in the early 1990s, when massive rockfall starting high on the cliff shattered and reached climbers on

the talus slopes far below.

Since neither Emma nor Kevin had a clear view of the block as it started falling, the immediate cause cannot be determined. However, climber-triggered rockfall cannot be ruled out. Cultivating an awareness of potential loose blocks and conditions that increase rockfall hazard is a must for those choosing to climb on Cannon and similar alpine crags. Early season is particularly hazardous, due to springtime wetness and freeze-thaw cycling, as is climbing immediately after heavy rain. Getting off route can increase the exposure to loose rock. Hollow sounding rocks, newly exposed sharp, clean edges, or gaps should raise suspicion. In general, avoid pulling on, standing on, placing protection around, or allowing ropes to drag against any suspicious rocks.

The hazard of rockfall severing the climbing rope could be somewhat mediated by using double-rope technique (two half ropes); skillful use of half ropes may also give the leader more options to bypass an area of suspicious rock.

This incident is a sobering reminder of the rockfall hazard on even the most popular Cannon routes. It's also important to remember that climbing below other parties on multi-pitch routes exposes climbers to a high risk of human-triggered rockfall and other falling objects. (Sources: Kevin Soleil, Bill Moriarty, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, and the Editors.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Kevin Soleil and Bill Moriarty, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports