



AAC Publications

Helicopter Requested At Sunset — Inadequate Planning

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Castle Mountain

A party of two climbers spent August 13 on Super Brewer, a long alpine rock climb that links the Ultra Brewer and Brewer Buttress routes on Castle Mountain. Ultra Brewer (330m, III 5.9) climbs to the Goat Plateau, a large ledge system at mid-height on the mountain, while Brewer Buttress (380m, II 5.6) continues to the top. A well-established yet fairly involved descent route follows a prominent gully with a few rappels to the Goat Plateau, and another series of rappels and downclimbing lead back to the base of the cliff.

Banff Dispatch received a call from an acquaintance of one of the climbers at 9:14 p.m., shortly after sunset. The caller had just talked to the subjects on their cell phone, and they reported they were still one pitch from the top. They had asked their acquaintance to call Parks Canada and arrange for them to be picked up from the top. Furthermore, they only had five percent battery life left on their phone.

Visitor Safety explained to the caller that it was too late for a helicopter to fly and requested the climbing party's phone number. The caller was asked not to contact the climbers again, so their remaining battery power could be used to communicate with Parks Canada.

Texts were sent to the subjects starting at 9:25 p.m. It was determined they had headlamps but did not know the usual climber's descent or the popular scrambling route down the opposite side of the mountain, and were using a topo stored on their phone for route information. The party was asked to decide whether they would attempt to descend or stay put. At 10:30 p.m., the party messaged back: "Too dark, we will stay here. Battery at 1%."

At this point, Visitor Safety made the decision to pick up the party first thing in the morning. This was not based on the party's request nor the expectation that they would have a rough night. Rather, there was no way to communicate with them. Further, even with good light and a route description in hand, many parties historically have had difficulty with this descent.

At 6:15 a.m. the next day, Visitor Safety personnel left Banff by helicopter. At 6:25 a.m., the party was found under their tarp, taking shelter in the lee of a rock outcrop directly above the top of the route. They were both adequately dressed and reported being a bit hungry and cold during the flight down to the highway.

ANALYSIS

The main problem facing this party was not knowing how to get down. If you plan to attempt a long, challenging route on a mountain, consider doing an easier route to learn the descent first. In this case, there were two viable descent options, but both would have been very difficult to figure out in the dark, and even more difficult with no route description or map. The party's decision to stay put was a good one.

The reliance on smart phones for communication, navigation, and a source of route information is becoming common. This tactic may work well on shorter, less-committing routes, but phones are less reliable on longer endeavors. As the device runs out of battery power, climbers are left with no communication resources at the most critical part of their day. Several strategies can be employed to

prevent this situation:

- Print hard copies of route information and maps. Each party member should carry this information so the ability to make decisions in an emergency is not compromised. If all else fails, the paper can be used as a fire starter.
- Carry alternate navigation tools, such as GPS or a compass.
- Carry a backup communication device.
- Preserve battery life. If battery strength starts to get low, shut the device off. If your group is carrying two devices, keep the backup shut off. Alternatively, carry a backup battery supply to keep devices functioning.

This party had plenty of daylight when they arrived at the Goat Plateau, where they had easy access to the lower half of the descent route. The decision to continue on the upper route without being sure of the way down was a significant gamble. When the climbing day is not going as planned, communicate this fact early to an outside party. Communicate a clear set of intentions, and stick to that plan so outside resources do not have to guess what you will do. Organize check-in times so you can turn off communication devices to preserve battery life. Above all, do not wait until sunset to call for help. It is an unreasonable assumption to expect a rescue at night.

Finally, getting benighted does not need to be considered an emergency, as long as a party is prepared with the appropriate equipment. This party was well equipped with waterproof outerwear, warm layers, and a tarp. They made a good decision not to attempt an unfamiliar descent in the dark, but with a written route description in their pockets, they likely could have safely descended in the morning for a big breakfast in Banff. (Source: Banff, Yoho & Kootenay National Parks Visitor Safety Team.)

Images

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