



## AAC Publications

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### Leader Fall — Protection Pulled Out

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Mt. Louis

**On August 28, an experienced party set out to climb Homage to the Spider (5.10a) on Mt. Louis, near Banff. The route is an alpine rock climb with a three-hour approach.** It starts with a few hundred meters of third-and fourth-class scrambling to reach a bolted anchor. From this anchor, there is a short descent into a gully, where the technical rock climbing starts.

The first pitch is 5.9 and includes a corner that is often dirty or wet. The leader started up this first pitch and made an extra effort to place some pieces in the lower part of the pitch. The upper part consists of a wide crack that can be protected with number 4 cams. In an effort to keep packs light, the climbers had brought only a single number 4, intending to bump that cam up the wide section. The leader had climbed the route several times before and felt comfortable with this tactic.

High on the pitch, the leader set the big cam and committed to the final moves up to the anchor. During a layback move, one foot slipped and the climber started falling. The number 4 cam pulled out of the rock, and the climber kept falling before being stopped by a smaller cam lower down. The climber's body contacted some ledgy terrain, and at least one ankle was broken. The belayer lowered the injured leader to the bottom of the climb, and the party called for help using their Satellite Emergency Notification Device (SEND).

Banff Visitor Safety personnel responded via helicopter and assessed the scene. The gully where the patient was located was too tight for helicopter access, but rescuers were able to move the injured climber and partner to the anchor above the pitch, from which the climbers and rescuers could be slung out to a staging area in the valley below.

### ANALYSIS

The leader was very experienced and had climbed Homage to the Spider six times. The route and gear requirements were known in detail. The leader also had a lot of experience placing trad gear and described the number 4 cam that pulled as "90 percent good." In hindsight, the leader thought the cam pulled out because the sides of the crack were coated with fine dirt and limestone dust. Meltwater from snow high up on the route funnels down the corner on pitch one, and this pitch is always covered in varying degrees of dirt. The leader felt that dirt on the sides of the crack decreased the friction between the cam lobes and the rock.

This is a common problem on alpine routes and even more so in winter with ice and water ever present. Cams are highly suspect if the friction of the cam lobes on the rock is inadequate. Passive protection that has a tighter fit—such as nuts, hexes, or pitons hammered into cracks—might inspire more confidence when the friction of the side walls is an issue.

On previous ascents of this route, the leader often did not place the smaller cam that actually caught the fall. The leader made an effort to place more protection this time and was very glad to have done so. That small cam had been deemed a much worse placement than the large cam that pulled out—but you never know what can happen. From a rescuer perspective, there was concern regarding rockfall from the party overhead. As a general rule, if you are above an accident scene, stop moving while a rescue is in process. If you are not moving, the chance of knocking rocks onto the scene

**below is greatly reduced.** (Source: Banff, Yoho & Kootenay National Parks Visitor Safety Team.)

## Images



Helicopter slinging injured climber to a staging area in the Gargoyle Valley between Mt. Louis and Mt. Edith.

## Article Details

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