



AAC Publications

Leader Fall – Belay Anchor Failure

Colorado, Eldorado Canyon State Park, Wind Tower

On August 26, two climbers fell over 100 feet from Wind Ridge (4 pitches, 5.7). Climber 1 was in his 20s and survived with severe injuries. Climber 2 was in his 30s. He sustained fatal injuries.

The pair had climbed the first pitch of Tigger (5.6), followed by the second pitch of Wind Ridge. The second-pitch belay occupies a large ledge and offers a walk-off descent. The team opted for two more pitches (the last “pitch” being an easy traverse to a two-bolt rappel station). In a [Climbing](#) magazine accident report, Climber 1 recalled using a cordelette to girth-hitch a horn in the alcove for a belay.

Climber 1 began leading the third pitch, which starts with awkward and strenuous moves into a large hueco. He exited the hueco and moved up, at which point he gave his belayer a warning and fell.

An eyewitness, Aubrey Runyon, was climbing below. She heard Climber 1 shout “Falling!” before plummeting and yanking the belayer off the ledge. The two climbers tumbled end over end until they stopped on a ledge with a tree above the first pitch of a route called Tagger.

Runyon had extensive search and rescue experience in Colorado and Arizona. She built a gear anchor in the crack she was climbing and immediately called 911. She then lowered to the fallen climbers. (Runyon’s belayer was still on the ground.)

Runyon saw that Climber 1 had a severely injured leg and wrist. He was in shock. Runyon was able to pick him up and put him on the ledge and stop the bleeding. She checked the other climber, who was tangled up in a tree. He was already deceased.

Rocky Mountain Rescue Group (RMRG) arrived at the base of the climb, ten minutes after the 911 call. By then, Runyon had fixed ropes for the responders to facilitate a quicker rescue.

ANALYSIS

Eldorado Canyon is notorious for its heady climbing style and demanding terrain. Adventure often extends into the realm of gear placements and, in this case, belay anchors. The second-pitch belay of Wind Ridge offers few obvious anchor options to the uninitiated. Though there are multiple possibilities, the best is a large block requiring a very long cordelette or using a climbing rope as a tie-off. Both these practices, while standard on routes of similar grade/length, are often not used by neophytes or those transitioning into trad from other disciplines. The block also positions the belayer in an inconvenient spot [see photo below]. The very size of the ledge can lull climbers into a false sense of security. The last point might explain this tragedy.

Runyon found no gear clipped to the rope between Climber 1 and Climber 2, indicating there may have been no intermediate protection between the two climbers at the moment of the fall. Later, SAR found no evidence of an anchor at the belay ledge. Perhaps the pair were unanchored. Perhaps their gear came unclipped or broke, as can happen in severe incidents. What is certain is their anchor, assuming they had one, was insufficient.

This exact spot was the site of an eerily similar accident several months prior [see report here]. One takeaway from this tragedy is that classic Eldorado climbs may ask more from the novice climber than the “easy” grade and endless queues at the base might indicate. (Sources: Gymclimber.com, Aubrey Runyon.)

Images



The second-pitch belay anchor on Wind Ridge is best built with this large block, in this case using part of the lead rope to tie it off. The long sling in the foreground is clipped to a cam placed in a shallow pocket.



Wind Ridge climbs directly to the circled belay ledge atop pitch two. From here, climbers can either escape left or continue through an overhang. In this incident, two climbers fell all the way to the point marked X after their belay anchor failed at the circled ledge. One of them was fatally injured.

Article Details

| | |
|----------------|------------------|
| Author | The Editors |
| Publication | ANAM |
| Volume | 12 |
| Issue | 75 |
| Page | 50 |
| Copyright Date | 2022 |
| Article Type | Accident reports |