



AAC Publications

Fatal Rockfall — Possible Wildlife Origin

Colorado, Clear Creek Canyon, Other Critters Crag

On December 4, a male climber (28) was struck by a falling rock while waiting at the base of the first pitch of Tortoise Scute (5.6), a three-pitch bolted climb. The block was reportedly microwave-sized. Although he survived the initial impact (he was wearing a helmet), he was later taken off life support at the hospital.

ANALYSIS

The rockfall initially was believed to have been generated by climbers above. However, it is improbable that a falling object dropped by climbers would have intersected the base of Tortoise Scute, as most of this crag's climbs and the walk-off descent route are far to the west of Tortoise Scute, and no climbers are believed to have been directly above the route at the time of the accident.

Evidence points to a natural event, quite possibly wildlife-generated rockfall. Climber Scott Turpin, who established highlines and climbs at a crag west of Other Critters and built a trail used to access these areas, said he frequently saw bighorn sheep in the area. "Especially in the winter and spring, bighorns would use the trail frequently, but were more often on the opposite side, directly above Safari and Other Critters. I saw lambs with them on multiple occasions. Though I was impressed by how agile the sheep were, I definitely saw them trundle rocks."

Colorado Parks and Wildlife senior wildlife biologist Shannon Schaller said, "Bighorns frequent Clear Creek Canyon. It's a lambing area, and they very possibly could have dislodged a rock above the climbing cliff." She notes, "Rocks triggered by bighorns are a potential hazard to climbers, though it's extremely rare as the sheep are very shy and tend to avoid people." Nonetheless, she said, "I personally have seen falling rock caused by wildlife. For the same reasons people like to climb in an area, it's also good for a bighorn habitat."

It's easy to be lulled into a sense of security at a very popular crag. The moderate grades, easy access, and sun-drenched aspect make this particular cliff a busy year-round destination. However, this is not a gym, and natural rockfall should be expected at any crag in a mountainous or canyon environment. (This is especially true after heavy rain or snow or during wind storms, all of which can dislodge rocks.) Adopting an alpinist's sense of mountain awareness can help prevent such accidents. Watch and listen for rockfall, try to choose protected belay areas, and wear helmets while climbing, belaying, or waiting your turn to climb. (Sources: Mountain Project, Scott Turpin, and Shannon Schaller.)

Images



The Other Critters cliff in Clear Creek Canyon attracts both two- and four-legged climbers. Bighorn sheep may have dislodged the rock that caused a fatality in December. The arrow marks the start of Tortoise Scute, where the climber was struck.

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