



AAC Publications

Stranded on Summit

Grand Teton National Park, Grand Teton

At 9 p.m. on August 30, the Jenny Lake rangers received a cell phone call from a climbing party of two requesting help getting down from the summit of the Grand Teton. The two climbers had left their camp at the Lower Saddle at 6 a.m. and spent 12 hours climbing the Lower Exum route (5.7), arriving at the Wall Street ledge at 6 p.m. They decided to continue climbing the Upper Exum, reaching the summit around 9 p.m. Climber 1 and Climber 2 had intermediate skills.

After a brief attempt to find the Owen-Spalding descent route, Climber 1 and Climber 2 concluded it was too dangerous for them to descend without help. One of the climbers called Teton Dispatch and described the predicament to ranger M. Shain. The climber indicated they were uninjured but would “likely die” if they tried to descend the icy rock route in the dark with only one headlamp. The climber also stated that neither of them had appropriate clothing to spend the night. With very little power left on the climber’s cell phone, ranger Shain instructed the climbers to find a site protected from the wind and told them it would be many hours before any help could reach them. Shortly thereafter, the climber’s phone battery died.

At 11 p.m., rangers N. Ronczkowski and C. Heerdt departed from the Lupine Meadows trailhead for the summit of the Grand Teton. They arrived at the NPS Lower Saddle camp at 2:15 a.m. on August 31 and added food, water, warm layers, climbing equipment, and crampons to their packs. The rangers continued up the Owen-Spalding route, reaching the summit of the Grand at 5 a.m. Shortly thereafter, the stranded party was found near the top of the Ford Couloir, to the southwest of the summit. The climbers were uninjured but very weak from their unplanned bivouac.

After receiving food, water, and warm clothing, Climbers 1 and 2 were short-roped down the upper Owen-Spalding route and assisted down the rappel to the Upper Saddle. At 7:25 a.m., ranger Ronczkowski reported that the rescued party was capable of continuing their descent to the Lower Saddle without any further assistance.

ANALYSIS

Late in the day it is easy to get overextended by the promise of a summit. One also has to account for the rigors of the descent after a long day. This party could have made the choice to descend along Wall Street in the evening after already spending 12 hours to complete the Lower Exum. Their decision to continue up another 1,000 vertical feet of easier but still technical terrain led to a cold night on the summit. On any long mountain route, sufficient water, food, extra clothing, and headlamps must be carried to allow either a safe nighttime descent or unplanned bivouac. (Sources: Ranger Ken Kreis, Grand Teton National Park, and the Editors.)

Images

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