



## AAC Publications

---

### Off Route Rappel — Improvised Rope Ascent

Wyoming, Devils Tower, South Face

**On May 25, Climber 1 (David) and Climber 2 experienced a common rappel mishap on Devils Tower. David recounts:**

I share this as a cautionary tale. After climbing the Bon Homme Variation (5.8) and then the Bailey Direct route to top out, we decided to head down by the Meadows rappels. I saw a cairn and some rap rings and rigged the rap, assuming I was on the Meadows rappel route. Boy was I wrong! After descending about 125 feet (with two 60-meter ropes), I realized I was off route. I saw a tiny ledge with a second rap anchor at 150 feet, but when I got there with no Meadows in sight, I knew I was screwed.

There was a steady 30 mph wind with gusts to about 45. Luckily, we had a set of small radios, so I could talk with my partner. I pulled up an end and tied in and had him start belaying me. Unfortunately, the climbing was well above my grade and the rock was covered with lichen and offered no grip, so I was going nowhere fast. He started hauling me but didn't know how to rig something to assist, so I had him tie off his ATC to fix the line.

I knew the concepts of self-rescue/jugging but hadn't ever practiced. I had to quickly figure it out. I carry a Petzl Micro Traxion as well as a Sterling HollowBlock to use as a prusik. I attached the HollowBlock high and clipped into it with my rappel extension. I put the Micro Traxion low on the rope and rigged a foot stirrup with a cordelette, all while hanging in air 500 feet above the boulder field.

I figured out the method—step up on the Traxion, slide up the prusik, sit back on the prusik, pull slack through the Traxion, repeat over and over. A few times, I got to where I thought I could climb, but it was too complicated to switch from jugging to climbing.

At one point the sling to my prusik got tangled in the Traxion. Somehow I got the Traxion opened (while just hanging on the prusik) and freed the sling. It's impossible to relay the genuine fear I had during this experience. In the end it all worked out, and in about an hour I was back on top. I learned a lot.

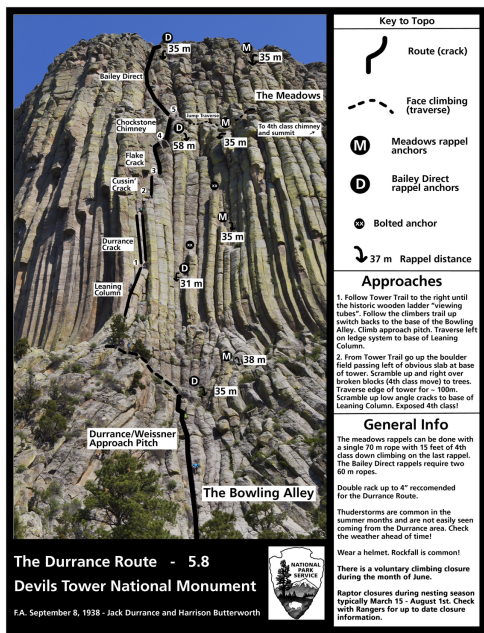
### ANALYSIS

The Meadows rappels are known to lead climbers astray and have been the location of at least one recorded fatality. The descent is unobvious, despite it being used to descend from the most popular routes on Devils Tower. With an almost 90-year rock climbing history, there are many anchors on the Tower—some at five-to ten-foot intervals—that make even well-traveled rappels problematic. As David recounts, "I should have spent more time looking around and been 100 percent sure of the descent route. The top of the Tower is disorienting if you don't pay attention to the landscape on the ground."

David was smart to carry tools for ascending a fixed rope—a little prior practice would have made his journey back to the anchor a lot easier. Learn and practice safe transitions from rappelling to ascending and the methods to back up such an ascent. Bringing radios was another good choice. David recalls, "It was very windy, and it was impossible to shout. Without the radios I'm pretty sure I would have had to call SAR. Best thirty dollars I ever spent." (Sources: David, via Mountain Project, and

the Editors.)

Images



The Meadows rappel descent is surprisingly deceptive, especially given its popularity. Over a thousand people use this descent every year.

Article Details

Author	David, via Mountain Project and The Editors
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	75
Page	96
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Accident reports