



## AAC Publications

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### **STRANDED — Severe Weather**

California, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan

**On April 23, the Yosemite Search and Rescue team (YOSAR) responded to a call from two climbers stranded near the top of Pacific Ocean Wall (28 pitches, VI 5.9 A3+) on El Capitan. The climbers were uninjured, but after weathering a multi-day winter storm on the wall, they found themselves cold, wet, and worn out. They decided to call for a rescue.**

The two climbers had started up the Pacific Ocean Wall on April 17. The climb was going great until April 21, when a sudden winter storm hit Yosemite Valley and the rim of El Cap received two feet of fresh snow, resulting in freezing runoff. When the climbers started up the route, the forecast had looked promising; however, day by day the outlook continued to deteriorate. What started as light rain quickly changed to freezing rain and snow. Climbing through cold and soggy conditions, the climbers found refuge under an overhang on the wall and decided to weather the storm.

Initially, the climbers were able to stay somewhat dry, but runoff from the melting snow eventually soaked them. After speaking on the phone with a friend who had done the wall in similar conditions (after a rainstorm, no snow), the climbers decided they should keep climbing. Thinking that moving would keep them warm and potentially dry them off, they decided to “blast the next three pitches.” Unfortunately, these pitches were running with freezing snow melt. With the potential for hypothermia, the climbers decided to request help from YOSAR and await their assistance.

Thankfully, the rescue itself was fairly simple. The climbers were mostly unharmed, although very cold. A team of four rescuers including a climbing ranger and three members of YOSAR went up the East Ledges. An additional rescuer was standing near El Cap Meadow to spot both the location of the stranded climbers and the rescuers above. This helped to ensure the top team was within “fall line” of the stranded climbers.

One member of YOSAR rappelled down to place edge protection for an additional rescuer who would rappel to the climbers. Once the edge protection was in place, a rescuer rappelled with three ropes to the climbers. Once the ropes were fixed, the climbers juggled to safety and descended on their own.

### **ANALYSIS**

Weather can be unpredictable. What appears to be a single day of rain in the forecast can suddenly morph into a two-day snowstorm. Checking the forecast often is a good idea, but anticipating the worst is even better. If possible, get information from friends on the ground. Could that small cloud actually be a large thunderhead just out of view?

Consider packing waterproof layers and extra insulation. If not climbing with a portaledge, consider tossing the rain fly in the bottom of the haul bag just in case. Bivy sacks weigh next to nothing and could save your life if the weather suddenly worsens.

It can be easy to let stoke, time restraints, fellow climbers, forecasts, and other factors affect your decisions on whether or “weather” or not to commit to a climb. Even if the forecast looks reasonable, don’t assume a storm will not occur. A former climbing ranger wisely stated, “Don’t allow the goal to blind your judgment.” (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

## Images



El Cap with Pacific Ocean Wall marked in red. The rescued climbers were attempting to “blast” to the top in a storm. They were caught by freezing runoff in the water streaks visible in the upper section of the route.

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