



AAC Publications

RAPPEL ERROR — Inadequate Backup

California, Yosemite National Park, Tuolumne Meadows, Matthes Crest

On August 13, a 911 caller reported that a male climber had fallen from Matthes Crest. The initial report stated the climber, part of a team of five, had taken a long fall and potentially sustained an open leg fracture. After the SAR team was notified, 13 rescuers were sent out to help the climber and his partners, who were stranded above.

On August 13, the team started early on Matthes Crest, a long 5.7 traverse. After gaining the initial headwall, the climbers slowed enough that they began to contemplate bailing. After discussing options, they decided to rappel down the west face. The injured climber later recalled that they rappelled from a tree at the top of the ridge before arriving at an alcove in the rock. There they found several strands of webbing wrapped around a jammed block. All five clipped into the webbing, then pulled the rappel rope.

Things took a turn for the worse. The soon-to-be-injured climber added another sling to the cluster of existing webbing. He then clipped a non-locking carabiner into the sling and also into the halfway point of the rope. He threaded the rope through an ATC-style device, which he extended and clipped to his belay loop via a locking carabiner. When he leaned back from the anchor, he fell, tumbling 200 feet, pulling the rope, leaving the others stranded at the alcove. Luckily, his climbing partners were able to make a 911 call for help.

The SAR team was prepared to access the climber and lower him to non-technical terrain. Once the hasty team reached the injured climber, they realized that a series of lowers wouldn't be necessary as the area where he'd fallen was broken and low angle. The climber was assessed and treated. He had sustained numerous injuries, including an open leg fracture, some closed fractures, and many open wounds. The climber was stabilized and prepared to be flown out by helicopter. He was extracted the following morning and transferred to a hospital in Fresno.

ANALYSIS

Matthes Crest, a classic backcountry climb in Tuolumne Meadows, involves several miles of hiking followed by about a mile of continuous ridge climbing. Complex route-finding, exposure, and the hike in and out make for a big day and full adventure.

Some helpful advice from the Yosemite climbing rangers:

Climb in smaller teams. This party was severely slowed because of its size. Climbing with a single partner or two speeds things up and keeps the logistical challenges to a minimum.

Use locking carabiners on anchors. It's not possible to say exactly what happened to cause this climber's fall, but it appears that the non-locking carabiner he used to clip the rappel rope to the anchor unclipped itself. Use locking carabiners on anchors, belay devices, and other critical points in your belay/rappel system.

Discuss bail options. Bailing is a part of climbing. At some point, every climber will need to retreat off a route. Knowing how to bail safely takes practice, thought, and clear communication with your climbing partners. During this accident, the risk might have been mitigated by reversing the route instead of rappelling into unknown terrain. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images



Matthes Crest is a one-of-a-kind, mile-long traverse in the High Sierra. Ridges present unique challenges, especially when it comes to retreat, as was the case in August 2022.

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