FALL ON ROCK — Loose Rock

Colorado, San Juan Mountains, El Diente Peak

On July 31, Leon Sparks (44) fell while attempting to climb 14,175-foot El Diente Peak in the San Juan Mountains. His plan was to approach via Navajo Lake and complete the standard loop that summits El Diente Peak, Mt. Wilson, and Wilson Peak. In an article on Outside.com, he said, "If everything worked out perfectly, I could have gotten all three in one day." That morning, Sparks had planned on a 4:30 a.m. start but was delayed by a stormy bivy, the evening prior. He said, "I didn't get going until 6 a.m. So I was late, and I was rushing." As he neared the 14,000-foot mark, he wandered off-route into 5th-class terrain. At this point, his left foot slipped and a hold broke in his left hand. Sparks fell, shattering his ankle. He nearly lost his Garmin inReach when his pack tumbled down a gully. However, Sparks managed to retrieve the device and summoned help. Mesa Verde Helitack arrived and delivered him to an ambulance.

ANALYSIS

The rock quality in the San Juan Mountains is generally poor, and a route-finding error not only may lead one into more difficult terrain but also expose a climber to less traveled and looser rock. In an article on Outside.com, Sparks said that, "My goal was to check all 58 Colorado 14ers off my list." He added, "I allowed that goal to overshadow simply being in the moment."

Sparks not only had a cell phone (and a cell signal), but also had the inReach. While this was a wise choice, his clothing, "a light long-sleeve fishing shirt, running shorts, knee-high compression socks, and my trail shoes," was inadequate. Given the unsettled weather—rain during the previous night and a late rainstorm on the afternoon of his rescue that almost delayed his evacuation—his choice of timing might not have been the wisest. (Sources: Leon Sparks, Outside.com, and the Editors.)

Images

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