



AAC Publications

FATAL ROCKFALL

Colorado, Twin Sisters Peak, Wizard's Gate

On July 9, Anna Laila Leikvold (22) was preparing to climb at the Wizard's Gate crag, south of Estes Park, when she was struck by a rock falling from above on a route called The Arrival (4 pitches, 5.11). Leikvold, who was wearing a helmet, was at the base of the cliff in a party of three when a football-sized rock dislodged by another climber struck her as she was fleeing from the base of the wall.

Bob Siegrist, a developer of this area and first ascensionist of The Arrival, wrote to ANAC, "I think the falling rock came from pitch two, but I did not talk with the climbers who were on the route and caused the rockfall. This speculation is based on talking with other climbers who were at the base and also my inspection of route after the accident. Later, I discovered a spot on pitch two where a stone had broken off, matching the features of the suspect rock that was found at the bottom of the crag below where Anna was struck."

Climbers called 911 and gathered to help Leikvold. Rescuers arrived with a litter, but she passed away before they reached the ambulance. Her evacuation was compounded by the rugged terrain and the lengthy hike to the road (the approach is a steep 30 to 45 minutes). Siegrist returned two weeks later and removed the bolts from the upper three pitches of the climb to prevent such an accident in the future.

ANALYSIS

There are annual instances of rockfall injury and fatalities suffered by climbers at the base of crags. With the growing popularity of multi-pitch sport routes—often extensions of existing single-pitch climbs—the need grows for caution on the ground and above. According to "Neale D" on Mountainproject.com, "There were over 20 of us climbing at or near Wizard's Gate [that day], maybe the most some have experienced at this crag. Most importantly though, probably in an effort to find something open to climb, several parties ventured up multi-pitch routes while others stuck to single-pitching below."

With a shady aspect and an elevation of 10,000 feet, Wizard's Gate is a popular high-country escape from Colorado's summer heat. Kim Schwartz, who was at the Wizard's Gate on the day of the accident, says, "It's easy to treat an area like this as a sport crag, but it is an alpine environment with all the attendant hazards."

For those climbing or rappelling above others, avoid loose rock, look for white chalk Xs marking unstable rocks, and be aware of how the rope might catch on sketchy blocks. Consider not climbing when others are below. For those below, wear a helmet while leading, belaying, or spectating. However, remember that in this case, a helmet did not save the individual's life. Adapting an alpinist's sense of mountain awareness can help prevent such accidents. Watch and listen for falling rock, and choose protected areas while belaying or waiting for your turn to climb. This is especially true if there are climbers above, after heavy rain or snow, and during windstorms.

A further lesson extends to route developers or first ascensionists. Pay heed the numbers and demographics of climbers venturing into alpine and remote areas, many of whom have little

experience in the risks inherent in such terrain. Consider the potential for both human-generated or natural rockfall before establishing new routes. This is especially true for multi-pitch routes extending above established routes.

For climbing at Wizard's Gate and similar areas, Siegrist has a few safety tips:

1. When arriving at an area like Wizard's Gate, carefully assess where people are climbing and identify risky situations. Locate your gear and hangout spots in the safest areas available. If the crag is too busy, especially with inexperienced climbers, don't hesitate to relocate to another area or another crag. Weekend days can be busy, so if you want to climb one of the multi-pitch routes, try to do so on days with few climbers below.
2. At Wizard's Gate and similar crags, consider wearing a helmet and have a plan in mind if someone yells, "Rock!" Typically, I advise that you run to the wall, extend your arms over your head, and do not look up. Rockfall at Wizard's Gate often originates from high up the wall, and stones falling from there often bounce off the wall before landing 10 to 30 feet from the base of the cliff.
3. Be aware of local resources if an accident occurs. At Wizard's Gate, there is now an EMS kit and Stokes litter located about 300 feet below the base of the cliff. It has first responder contacts. I spearheaded the effort after the accident and am the current custodian. (Sources: Bob Siegrist, Kim Schwartz, Kelly Cordes, and Mountainproject.com.)

Images



The base of Wizard's Gate, where people often congregate, was the site of a tragic rockfall fatality. The bolts on the route where the rockfall originated, higher on the wall, were later removed.

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