



STRANDED – Stuck Rappel Ropes

New York, Adirondacks, Moss Cliff

At 6:30 p.m. on October 16, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) rangers received a call from two climbers who were stranded on Moss Cliff in Wilmington Notch, within Adirondack State Park. Moss Cliff is a 400-plus-foot face with a 30-minute approach that involves fording a small river.

The two climbers had topped out on a four-pitch trad climb called Hard Times (5.9+) and completed their first rappel from the bolted rappel station at the top of the final pitch. When the climbers went to pull their rope, it would not budge. After repeated attempts to pull the rope down, the climbers considered themselves to be stranded and used a cell phone to contact rangers.

A DEC ranger was able to talk to the subjects via cell phone. She determined that the subjects still had both ends of the rope, and that it would be possible for one of them to use prusiks to climb the rope back to the anchor. However, the climbers did not have prusik loops and were unfamiliar with techniques for ascending a rope. The DEC ranger was able to coach the climbers by phone on how to use sewn slings as prusiks around both strands to ascend the rope. She instructed them to create two prusiks—a short one attached to one climber's harness and one long one as a foot loop—and ascend the rope using standard technique. She also instructed them to tie in directly every few feet as a backup, should the prusik attached at the waist fail.

The climbers completed one round of practice with the ranger on the phone before one of them prusiked to the top of the climb to free the rope from the crack in which it had been stuck. The ranger instructed the subjects to pull the knot down past the obstruction and place a nut in the crack to block the rope, thereby avoiding another stuck rope. They were able to retrieve their rope at this point and finish their descent. During this process, the ranger had approached the cliff herself to ensure the subjects were okay. The subjects had left their headlamps in their packs at the base of the cliff, not expecting to be caught in the dark. The ranger assisted the subjects across the west branch of the Ausable River and back to the trailhead.

ANALYSIS

More people than ever are learning to climb in a gym or on sport routes. Thus, they can become stronger climbers much faster than in the past, without learning the foundational skills associated with outdoor traditional climbing. These climbers were very capable, successfully climbing a four-pitch 5.9+ trad route, but were not familiar with relatively basic rope ascension techniques.

Investing in self-rescue skills is an important part of transitioning from gym to crag. These can be learned through mentorship (informally or with a guide), through self-rescue courses, or even by reading a book or watching YouTube videos on self-rescue. A few minutes invested in learning and practicing ascending a rope with prusiks would have prevented the need for rangers to be called. The climbers were right to have brought a cell phone and to use it to call for help. Had they been unable to receive help by phone, the climbers' situation would have turned significantly more dire, as they would have been stuck several hundred feet up the face for a night or longer.

The climbers in this incident did not have headlamps and were unprepared to be out after dark.

Stashing a small headlamp in the bottom of a chalk bag is a great way to ensure you always have one with you. (Sources: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Forest Rangers and the Editors.)

Editor's Note: See the September 2023 edition of the Prescription for additional information and insight from the ranger involved in this incident.

Images

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