



AAC Publications

FATAL ROCKFALL – Climber Hit at Base of Cliff

South Dakota, Black Hills, Spearfish Canyon

On August 20, Angela Heinz (24) was at the base of a cliff in Spearfish Canyon when a rock dislodged from above, hitting her in the head. The impact caused a brain hemorrhage. She passed away after being airlifted to the hospital in Rapid City.

ANALYSIS

The routes in Spearfish Canyon are one-pitch climbs on bolted limestone. The climbing is generally on solid rock, but loose blocks can exist in any climbing area, and as with many canyons, steep slopes with potentially loose rock often rise above the cliffs.

Heinz was one of three climbers in 2022 to be struck by a rock while at the base of a climb, two of whom died from their injuries (see pages 47 and 79). The lessons elsewhere apply here. For those climbing or lowering above others, avoid loose rock, look for white chalk Xs marking unstable rocks, and be aware of how the rope might catch on loose blocks. For those below, wearing a helmet while leading, belaying, or spectating is advisable. However, note that in this case (and another from 2022), a helmet did not save the individual's life. Keep your eyes and ears open for falling rock, and try to choose protected belay stances or places to wait for your turn to climb. This is especially true if there are climbers above, after heavy rain or snow, and during windstorms. (Sources: Black Hills Pioneer.)

Images

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