



AAC Publications

ROCKFALL

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Mt. Moran

On August 16 at 12:36 p.m., rangers received a cell phone call from a climber who reported that his two partners needed assistance at 9,600 feet on Mt. Moran (12,610'). The reporting party (RP) was descending the CMC Route and was in communication with his climbing partners via emergency satellite device. The RP stated that the injured climber had been struck in the leg by rockfall triggered by his partner while traversing from the top of the Direct South Buttress route to the CMC Camp. The patient was reported to be in stable condition, but his leg was “crushed.”

The injured climber was Carter Ley (male, 20). He wrote ANAC, saying that as he and Will Hodgson (male, 20) were ascending a gully as part of the traverse to CMC Camp, “we reached a steep section and Will started climbing above me. I followed about 20 feet under him. [Will yelled], ‘Rock! Rock!’ I looked up. Will had dislodged a microwave-sized block that plummeted toward me. I remember watching it spin as it approached my head—a perfect trajectory. I knew I was going to die. I almost cleared the path, but the boulder struck my knee.

“It probably weighed 250 pounds. My first thought was, ‘Wow that was close. Good thing it missed my head.’ Then I started to climb, but I couldn’t. My knee was screaming. I couldn’t put weight on it. Will fixed our ropes and helped me get to a better ledge. We had plenty of daylight left, so we decided to wait an hour to see if my knee improved. I got some ibuprofen going, and we sent Liam (the reporting party from the NPS report) a text from our satellite device to let him know what happened. It became clear that I wasn’t improving, and we began to talk about how to get down. The problem was that we were not on an established route, and there was no easy way down. As we were discussing our options, a huge thundering noise erupted a few hundred feet above us. A truck-sized boulder had dislodged. We took shelter behind a small rock, and the boulder stopped sliding after several hundred feet.

“We knew that the CMC route, with its established trail, provided the safest descent. But I wouldn’t be able to move fast enough across the dangerous gully between us and the route. And we estimated it would take me two days to get down. We had enough food and shelter to make this happen, but if Will got hurt on the descent, I would be in no position to help him. And with a previously reconstructed ACL on the same knee, I was worried about absolutely destroying it on the way down. It became clear that the smartest option was to call for a rescue. It wasn’t an easy decision. Not only is it embarrassing, but calling a rescue also endangers more people and diverts resources from potentially more urgent issues.

“After making the decision, we sent a text to Liam who got in touch with our friend Holly. We were out of cellular range, so Liam and Holly acted as intermediaries. This was preferable to hitting the SOS button on the satellite communicator because it allowed us to convey more information to the responders. A few hours later, a helicopter circled above us but left because it couldn’t find a place to land. We were confused, but our friends sent messages reassuring us that it had gone back to refuel and assist with another rescue.

“After a few more hours, we heard the welcoming sound of rotor blades again. A minute later, the helicopter appeared as a tiny dot below the horizon. Two rescuers were dangling a hundred feet below the helicopter. The pilot carefully brought them to us, and they unclipped from the helicopter. The rescuers assessed and stabilized my leg. One of them connected me to his personal anchor,

and the helicopter returned to pick us up. The other guy stayed with Will. The helicopter swiftly took us over Leigh and Jenny Lakes to the ranger station, where an ambulance was waiting to take me to the hospital. After dropping us off, the helicopter returned to pick up Will and the second rescuer. An MRI later revealed that all muscles and ligaments were intact, but there was severe damage to the quad and quad tendon. A few weeks of physical therapy had me walking again.” (Sources: Grand Teton National Park Search and Rescue Report and Carter Ley.)

ANALYSIS

Loose rock plays a role in many accidents, especially in the mountains. Ley wrote, “We like to think that our skill as climbers shields us from injury, but rockfall and avalanches don’t care if you’re a good climber. Will and I didn’t do anything wrong. We weren’t far out of personal margins—we cruised the technical climbing and had to be rescued from the easy hiking portion. It goes without saying that easy and low consequence are very different. I don’t think we could have done anything differently. We were far apart and roping up for that section could have killed both of us.”

The last bit is worth noting as, while in principle, roping up is safer, in reality it can cause parties to travel in a slower, encumbered manner. Ropes also tend to dislodge rocks (see page 98). Ley further wrote, “I used to consider the inReach as a backup, but it’s as important as ropes and cams in ranges like the Tetons. They’re small and light, so there’s no excuse for parties not to carry at least one.” (Sources: Carter Ley and the Editors.)

Images



The inReach device used to arrange a rescue on Mt. Moran. Rather than hitting the SOS button, the climbers used the device's texting capability to communicate with friends, who relayed information to rescuers.



Will Hodgson climbing on the Direct South Buttress of Mt. Moran. The next day his partner Carter Ley was struck by a large rock. His injuries required them to call for a rescue.

Article Details

Author	Grand Teton National Park Search and Rescue and Carter Ley
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	76
Page	90
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Accident reports