



AAC Publications

Fatal Unroped Fall

California, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan

On October 2, a 55-year-old male was reported missing by his son. The missing climber had failed to return from a solo attempt on the West Gully of El Capitan. Members of Yosemite Search and Rescue (YOSAR) were deployed, and after a few hours of searching, the body of the missing climber was located near the base of the gully. He had sustained fatal injuries.

The West Gully is a historic route dating back to 1905. Of note, one of the first ascensionists also took a fatal fall. The route has an easy technical grade (5.5) but is notorious for loose rock and difficult route-finding. Many climbers and hikers underestimate the complexities of this climb when seeking a route to the summit of El Capitan.

The terrain in the West Gully is steep, rocky, and vegetated. Ultimately, the team decided that lowering systems and guiding lines would expose personnel to the least hazard. Multiple hours were required for rigging and recovery.

The cause of death was cranial trauma secondary to either a fall or being struck by a falling rock. The exact sequence of events leading to the fall remains unclear, but it is likely that the climber slipped, broke a hold, or fell while climbing off route.

ANALYSIS

Contributing factors in this incident included:

- **Lack of Protective Equipment.** The climber was not wearing a helmet, which could have mitigated or prevented the fatal head injury.
- **Terrain Challenges.** El Capitan's West Gully has 4th- and 5th-class terrain. This terrain may have exceeded the skill level of the deceased climber.
- **Solo Climbing.** Embarking on any climb without a partner reduces one's ability to receive immediate aid or outside assistance in the event of an accident.
- **Route Information.** Despite its being a technical climbing route, West Gully route information is shared on numerous hiking apps and websites. When researching a technical climb, it is best to gather information from fellow climbers and climbing-specific resources. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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