



AAC Publications

Free Soloist Rescue

California, El Cajon Mountain, The Wedge

The stranded free soloist above was rescued shortly after this photo was taken. One of the rescuers was Chase Morgan. He wrote to ANAC, "The soloist was standing on a sloping foot ledge, just below the slippery crux, about 45 feet off the ground. He'd been there for at least an hour— more likely two." Photo: Brent Donovan

On February 12, Brent Donovan and Chase Morgan were hiking to El Cajon Mountain (ECM), east of San Diego, for a day of rock climbing. They were interrupted when they saw a free soloist stranded on the first pitch of Leonids. Free soloist Nathaniel Takatsuno fell from Leonids (3 pitches, 5.9) several months prior, on December 4, 2022.

Morgan wrote to ANAC:

Brent and I started up the trail around 7 a.m. ECM has an ass-kicker of an approach that gains nearly 2,000 feet of elevation in less than two miles. About 30 minutes into the approach, we were close enough to the wall to make out a person hanging out below one of the crux moves of Leonids. Our initial impression was that a person was hanging out five bolts up, trying to get it together to pull the slippery layback move. We both joked about having been in that spot more than once. Despite being an "easy" route, that move never feels secure.

Farther up the trail, the person came back into view, and he was still in the same spot. We figured it was a newer climber struggling on the move. When we got to the base around 8:30 or 8:45 a.m., the climber had been stuck for at least one hour. By the time we realized he was unroped, he was yelling for help.

He told us he couldn't downclimb the 45 feet below because he was "definitely going to fall" if he tried. He also said he thought if he had soloed the route, he could downclimb to the right (the actual 4th-class downclimb is to the left—to the right involves pitches up to 5.10). I told him to sit tight. He mentioned having a harness and quickdraws in his bag at the base of the cliff, but no rope. It was unclear what his plan was with the gear, but it made the rescue easier. I would put him at college age, late teens to early 20s.

I grabbed his harness and some of his draws and led up to him on my rope. I clipped a draw to the bolt that was shoulder level with him (the fifth bolt, about 45 feet up) and tied a quad-length sling around his waist. I secured the sling to my belay loop with a locker, while he slipped on his harness. The stance was uncomfortable (his calves were probably on fire at this point), but good enough for him to go hands-free. After he was harnessed up, I attached his belay loop to my belay loop with a sling and a locker. I had Brent take tight on the rope and lower us both. I then went up and back-cleaned all the draws but the top one. (A friend climbed the route and returned that draw later in the day.) The whole rescue took less than 15 minutes.

ANALYSIS

El Cajon Mountain is a bad place to solo. Few routes have a walk-off, and the climbing is often thin face on brittle holds. We tried to get as much of the story as we could from him, but he was reluctant to share details and seemed quite embarrassed. He took off down the trail almost immediately after

we got him to the ground, even though we told him that if he waited 15 minutes we could get his quickdraws for him. We learned he had never climbed at ECM before (possibly never outside a gym) and was completely unaware that a 22-year-old [Takatsuno] had died on the same route only two months prior.

His harness and shoes were almost brand-new, and his quickdraws still had price tags on them. There seemed to be complete lack of awareness of the limitations of his ability and of the terrain he was entering. I can only speculate why he chose to solo. He looked to be in pretty good shape, so my guess is that he climbs pretty hard in the gym and felt that 5.9 would be easy. He expressed that it was a stupid decision and that he would never do it again.

While I hate to see people get themselves into these situations, I would hate even more to find his mangled body on the ground. I'm glad he waited for people to show up instead of getting himself hurt—although he probably would have downclimbed just fine. San Diego has seen a disproportionate share of free solo fatalities recently, between the two ECM deaths* and Mike Spitz's fall off Illusion Dweller in Joshua Tree (see ANAC 2023). I'll take an embarrassed soloist over a fatality any day. (Sources: Chase Morgan and Brent Donovan.)

On July 31, 2023, Adam Shmidt (34) died while free soloing Sleeping Giant (1,000 feet, 5.10a), also on El Cajon Mountain.

Images



The stranded free soloist above was rescued shortly after this photo was taken. One of the rescuers was Chase Morgan. He wrote to ANAC, "The soloist was standing on a sloping foot ledge, just below the slippery crux, about 45 feet off the ground. He'd been there for at least an hour—more likely two."

Article Details

Author	Chase Morgan and Brent Donovan
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	77
Page	
Copyright Date	2024
Article Type	Accident reports