



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock — Wet and Dirty Rock, Protection Pulled Out

New Hampshire, North Conway, Cathedral Ledge, Barber Wall

On July 30, we were a party of six trying to crag at Cathedral Ledge after a night of pouring rain. We decided to get a late start to let the routes dry out. Since the Barber Wall is the highest crag at Cathedral and gets sun, we thought it would dry quicker. We didn't find the main trail, but managed to go through the forest and arrive there around 1 p.m. Most of the routes were dripping wet. My belayer and I tried Grim Reaper (5.10d R), while the other four searched for climbable routes.

I roped up and got to a ledge. Ten or fifteen feet up, I placed a green-yellow offset Alien in a dirty, mossy crack at hip level. The smaller lobes of the offset cammed well, but the larger side didn't. I made a few layback moves to an okay stance and placed a terrible number 0.5 cam (both sets of lobes were tipped out) in a downward-flaring crack. I tried to gain the next big layback flake, but the route was dirty, mossy, and wet.

I lost confidence and called "take." My belayer asked if I could downclimb. I could have downclimbed without much difficulty, but I panicked and kept yelling to take.

The belayer took in the slack, but the 0.5 cam didn't hold body weight and popped. The offset Alien also popped, resulting in me tumbling down to the belayer's level. I hit two intermediate ledges and eventually landed on some dirt, rolled, and was stopped by a big tree. I fell 20 or 30 feet. I had a helmet, so the main impact was on my hip and upper back. The belayer wasn't anchored, so they slipped and stopped a few feet from the edge of a cliff below. There was a 200-foot drop behind him where he could have tumbled the whole way down.

We walked out and went to the ER in North Conway. I suffered abrasions, a bruised bicep, bruised hip and chest, and a very mild T9 vertebra fracture. I was able to drive home after being discharged.

ANALYSIS

- After the accident, the staff at a local climbing store said the Barber Wall is the wettest cliff at Cathedral Ledge. We should have asked about conditions.
- I had climbed a wet 5.8 crack on gear without any problem the prior week, which made me too ambitious. I underestimated how conditions affect a climb and the gear placements.
- Onsight climbing on granite is very different from what I am accustomed to—overhanging sport climbs with obvious big holds.
- I could have found better gear placements, especially for the first piece.
- Downclimbing could have saved the day, but I panicked. Being mostly a sport climber, "take" in this case promoted a false sense of security. It made me ignore how marginal the placements were.
- We might have been able to access the top of this route to set up a top-rope. But getting lost on the approach and losing time made setting up a top-rope seem like a hassle.

- We should have anchored the belayer. (Source: Anthony Wong.)

***Editor's Note:** A well-placed nut is easier to assess and much more reliable than a cam in wet or dirty rock.

Images

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