



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock — Quickdraw Unclipped From Bolt Hanger

North Carolina, Piedmont Region, Pilot Mountain State Park

It's an unsettling thought, but carabiners can, on rare occasion, unclip from bolt hangers. When the bolt is clipped from right to left and the hanger angles down to the right, tension on the quickdraw can raise the carabiner and lever the gate open. Illustration: Foster Denney

My climbing partner (31) and I, Alec Gilmore (29), went sport climbing at Pilot Mountain State Park.

I have ten years of climbing experience and my partner has six, and we both take pride in our risk assessment and careful approach. The first route we planned to climb was occupied, so we found a nearby route that neither of us had previously tried. We incorrectly identified the route as a 5.7; it actually was Goodness Gracious (5.10a). I quickly realized the route was harder, but I had previously led up to 5.11 at Pilot Mountain, so I went on and clipped three bolts and then hung to work out the crux. It involved throwing a high heel hook and manteling onto an awkward bulge.

I got partially over the bulge and needed to make one more move but couldn't find a good handhold. I ended up falling off. Instead of getting a catch, I hit the ground after falling 20 feet. Both feet landed on a flat rock step on the main hiking trail. My belayer took up enough slack that the rope started to catch right as my feet hit. After lying on the ground, overcoming the initial shock and pain, I realized the alpine quickdraw that I had clipped into the third bolt was still clipped to the rope. Somehow, as I was wrestling with the move, it had come unclipped from the hanger. I was wearing a helmet, but fortunately I did not hit my head or back during the fall.

Alerted by a nearby climber, a team of park employees, other climbers, and volunteers arrived in about 30 to 45 minutes and loaded me onto a transport basket. For the next hour and a half, they carried me back up to the summit, where an ambulance was waiting. At one point, they rigged a rope and hauled me up a steep hill to shorten the journey. At the hospital, X-rays showed I had fractured both heel bones. One of the fractures was bad enough to require surgery, and I received a plate and four screws.

ANALYSIS

The first mistake we made was not being sure of what route we were climbing. The route I fell from was on my to-do list, but the plan was to warm up with an easier climb. The second mistake was the positioning of the carabiner on the bolt hanger. I knew that it was possible for a carabiner to unclip from a bolt hanger if the carabiner is pulled up in a certain way. I try to keep the spine of the carabiner pointed in the direction I'm climbing. When I was clipping the third bolt, I thought I would climb toward the left side of the bulge. The line turned out to go right, and somehow the quickdraw came unclipped.

***Editor's Note:** In rare instances, carabiners can come unclipped from bolt hangers. A few things to consider: The hanger-clipping-end carabiner should be loose in the sling, never held by a rubber keeper. Both carabiners on a quickdraw should be oriented with the gates facing the same direction. As Alec mentions, quickdraws should be clipped so the spine of the carabiner is oriented in the direction of travel and the gates are facing away.

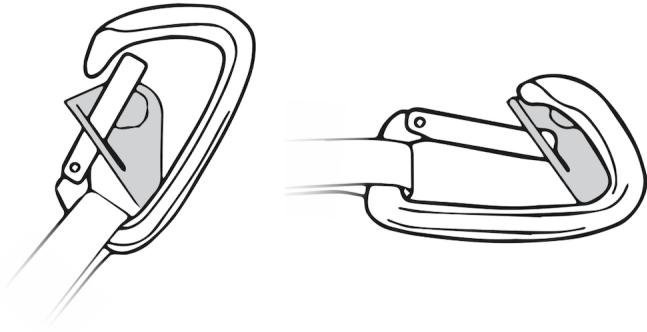
The direction in which one clips a bolt hanger also can be a factor. Clipping the opposite direction from the angle of the carabiner hole will minimize the possibility of the carabiner levering against the hanger and unclipping. Almost all plate-style bolt hangers have the clipping section on the left side of

the hanger. So, the ideal clipping direction would be from left to right. Other factors (like the ones mentioned above) may be more important in a given situation, but when you have a choice, this is the preferred method.

For even more security, a safer play is to flip the gate so it opens downward. Better yet, if the clip is critical, e.g., before or after a runout, use a locking carabiner on the hanger end of the quickdraw.

(Sources: Alec Gilmore and the Editors.)

Images



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