



AAC Publications

Rockfall and Shortcuts

Wyoming, Multiple Incidents and Locations

The 2023 Teton climbing season saw several incidents involving rockfall and climbers taking shortcuts.

One incident occurred on July 30, involving a 26-year-old female climber descending the Southwest Couloir on the Middle Teton (12,809 feet). This climber fell after being hit by rockfall while on a shortcut from the main couloir to the south fork of Garnet Canyon. This is a common shortcut used to avoid traveling to the lowest part of the saddle to the south of the Middle Teton. The terrain is steeper and holds more loose rock than the descent to the saddle proper. A similar incident occurred on September 8 when a 65-year-old male climber fell while also shortcutting the same exit. Unfortunately, this climber was deceased by the time rescue personnel were notified that he had not returned from his planned ascent.

Another rockfall incident occurred in the afternoon of August 11. A 35-year-old male climber was hit by falling rocks while on the Owen-Spalding rappels. Thankfully, before NPS arrived, guides and climbers in the vicinity were able to assist the climber, who was suffering from an altered mental status.

On August 26, a member of a team attempting the traverse from Teewinot to Mt. Owen dislodged a boulder, hitting his 37-year-old male partner. The boulder impacted the climber's lower left leg, and the resulting closed injury showed signs of early compartment syndrome and prevented the climber from walking. Weather prevented a rescue directly from the scene. A climbing ranger was inserted along the ridge to the west at 12:33 p.m. The ranger and climbing partner were able to move the patient to a lower elevation with flyable weather.

ANALYSIS

The similar nature of these incidents caught the attention of climbing rangers. Rescue personnel would like to remind climbers of the dangers both of rockfall and of taking shortcuts. Although rockfall can occur without warning, climbers often miss cues such as melt-freeze cycles or fail to discern areas with poor rock quality. Taking shortcuts to bypass sections of a climb or descent can also take longer than anticipated and expose climbers to more difficult terrain than primary routes. (Source: Grand Teton National Park Search and Rescue Report.)

Images

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