



AAC Publications

Long Fall on Slab — Descending Unroped, Mosquito Swarms

California, Yosemite National Park, Tuolumne Meadows, Tenaya Peak

This photo of Tenaya Peak shows a section of the descent (red line). The end of the red line marks where an unroped climber slipped and fell. The yellow arrowed X shows where the 70-foot fall ended. Photo: Russell Bengert

On June 13, my longtime partner Samuel Schaefer (30) and I, Russell Bangert (37), were enjoying the Northwest Buttress of Tenaya Peak (1,400 feet, 5.5). This was my first day in Tuolumne and Sam's third time up the route. As we finished the climb, storms were building in the distance. We quickly scurried over the summit and started down the descent...straight into a cloud of the mosquitoes that plague the area in late spring.

The mosquitoes swarmed as lightning struck in the distance. As we got lower, each step through any grass on the ledges kicked up unbelievable clouds of mosquitoes. As I found myself looking down a final section of slab, a premature sense of relief washed over me—I pictured myself waltzing across the slab and then running from the mosquitoes, back to the car.

In my haste, I miscalculated the frictional coefficient of my new approach shoes. Suddenly, my left foot skated ever so slightly. As I stopped cold, my relief turned to horror as I noticed I had walked onto the most polished section of quartz monzonite I'd ever seen.

I turned to face in, dropped to one knee...and started sliding ever so slowly. I fell into a sitting position and began desperately paddling with my hands and feet. I kept sliding, without gaining too much speed, down the first 30 feet of slab. I had time to look up at Sam and say, "Oh no!" I then began picking up speed while screaming, "NO! NO!"

Just before the pitch steepened, I made a futile attempt to catch a shallow cleft. My hands bounced off and I turned facing out, finally able to see what I was in for. The slab steepened to over 70°, and I accelerated down a final 40 feet. I have no memory of impact. The slope at the bottom was steep enough to allow me to continue tumbling another 25 feet as I rag-dolled and bounced twice.

I came to a stop face down on several basketball-sized rocks sticking out of the dirt. I moved my fingers and toes: "I'm not paralyzed!" I rolled over on my side, moaning. Sam scrambled down to me and noticed I was soaking wet, covered in mud, and gasping. I stood up, and Sam told me to stop moving. I ripped my shirt off, looking for trauma, then sat down and then rolled onto my back. Immediately, a swarm of mosquitoes descended. I picked up my left arm to look at a dozen of them biting me. I made futile attempts to brush them off before giving up as the swarm returned.

We discussed the situation. I told Sam I thought I just had some bulging disks and my ribs hurt. He asked if I wanted him to go get help. I thought of waiting in the clouds of mosquitoes for hours and decided to try walking down to treeline to re-evaluate. I hobbled into the trees and yelled back to Sam that I was going to keep moving. We finished the remaining 680 feet of descent and 1.12 miles back to the car. In the car, I spent the next hour and a half trying to minimize the pain until we got to the Yosemite clinic. There, they loaded me into an ambulance, and a CHP chopper soon gave me a ride to the Fresno trauma center.

ANALYSIS

My best estimate is that I slid 70 feet down the slab, then tumbled another 25 feet down a rocky slope. I was not wearing a helmet at the time. I wore it when we roped up on the route and put it away on the summit. My injuries were a mild compression fracture to my L1 vertebra and a separated rib.

My accident resulted from a combination of factors:

Confirmation Bias: Six seasons on the slabby granite in Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah, allowed me to feel right at home on my first day in Tuolumne. I walked facing outward down steeper slabs in flip-flops.

Complacency in Gear Selection: I usually carry a small spray pen of DEET in the first-aid kit, but not on this occasion.

Complacency in the Final Stages: We all know a high percentage of accidents happen on the way down. With the end of the exposed scramble in sight, I let my guard down before I should have.

Moving with Haste: The approaching storm and mosquito swarms created a false sense of urgency. These external pressures caused me to rush and fall on very consequential terrain. (Source: Russell Bangert.)

***Editor's Note:** Two weeks later on June 26, a different climber (37) was not so fortunate on Tenaya Peak. They fell and were rendered unconscious and spent the night on a ledge before being discovered by another group of climbers. This climber had been using a popular hiking app that provided inaccurate information, while downplaying the technical nature of the route.

Images



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Article Details

Author	Russell Bangert
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	78
Page	
Copyright Date	2025
Article Type	Accident reports