



AAC Publications

Rockfall

California, Yosemite National Park, Yosemite Valley, Lower Cathedral Rock

On October 14, at approximately 5:30 p.m., a climber on the East Buttress of Lower Cathedral (IV 5.10+) was struck on the head by a football-sized rock dislodged by their partner. The climber was bleeding but remained responsive to verbal stimuli. A rescue team was dispatched to treat the injured climber and to raise them to the summit of Lower Cathedral.

The rescue team began their ascent of Gunsight Gully to access Lower Cathedral's summit at 7:14 p.m. On top, the team constructed a lowering system to access and extract the injured climber. NPS paramedics reached the patient and began assessment. The climber's vital signs were within normal limits, though his level of consciousness remained altered throughout the operation. The patient was oriented to name only and complained of head, neck, and back pain. An additional rescuer was lowered to the scene with a litter, and the patient was packaged and secured for raising.

The operation to extract the climber from the ledge commenced at 9:35 p.m., and the technical raise was completed at 12:13 a.m. on October 15. Once on the summit, a portion of the rescue team remained overnight to monitor the patient and prepare for a helicopter operation the following morning. The other rescuers escorted the uninjured team members down to the valley floor.

At approximately 9 a.m., the NPS helicopter short-hauled the injured climber back to El Cap Meadow. The patient was then transferred to a medical helicopter and flown to a hospital for further treatment.

ANALYSIS

Rockfall hazard assessment: This incident highlights the unpredictable danger of rockfall on technical climbing routes. All climbers should wear helmets and remain vigilant in areas where loose rock may be present. This is especially true on long, exposed pitches where protection from falling debris is limited.

Night rescues and team coordination: Due to the time of this incident, helicopter rescue was not an option. Instead, a ground-based team performed the technical rescue in the dark—a complex and potentially hazardous operation. Climbers should be prepared for self-rescue and/or extended delays due to weather, limited daylight, and other factors.

Overnight preparedness: Whether because of unexpected delays on the climb or descent or more extreme situations like a rescue, climbers should carry adequate equipment should an unintended bivouac be necessary. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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