



AAC Publications

Rockfall — Near Miss, Rock Dislodged on Rappel

California, Yosemite National Park, Yosemite Valley, Royal Arches

Royal Arches takes a remarkably moderate line up the buttress to the left of the massive arch, pictured above. On Memorial Day, crowding on the rappel descent prompted one team to take a shortcut. This instigated rockfall that nearly killed or severely injured several climbers. Photo: James St. John — Wikimedia

On May 26, my partner and I (male, 20) got stuck behind three extremely slow climbing teams on the last five pitches of Royal Arches (15 pitches, 5.10- or 5.7 A0). We were able to pass one of the teams on the last two pitches, but the next party was unwilling to let us pass. This group spoke little English and didn't have experience outside of a gym class. They were to be first in line for the rappel descent (16 to 18 rappels). It took almost five hours for them to complete the initial nine rappels.

At this point, we decided to speed things up and skip one rappel, so instead of making the tenth rappel, I would lower my partner from rappel number nine and I would downclimb to a large ledge on 4th- or 5th-class terrain. I had downclimbed this section many times before.

My partner got safely to the next anchor and started pulling the rope while I was downclimbing. The rope pulled through the anchor bolts and landed on a ledge, where it got stuck. My partner asked me to help, so I gave the rope a few moderate pulls and it dislodged two rocks, each about the size of a human head. I was about ten feet below the ledge and screamed "ROCK!" repeatedly. I tried to redirect one rock into a gully and away from the party below. This did not work, and I sustained a bruise and laceration on one of my hands. The rocks continued straight for the next anchor ledge, where there were four people standing and one had just started to rappel.

The three English speakers ducked while the two non-English speakers stuck their heads out to see what the commotion was about. The rocks came within three feet of killing those two and about five feet from cutting their rope.

We apologized profusely and offered to buy pizza as we passed them at another rappel station below. We also showed them the location of some hard-to-find anchors. We later bought the English speakers pizza. They told us that the non-English speakers had started climbing at 6 a.m. on that day and eventually decided to bivouac around 9:30 p.m. on the ledge where the rockfall occurred.

ANALYSIS

My takeaway is to stick to the standard line while rappelling. Not doing so may cause your rope to fall in places that might be full of loose rock. Be patient. On crowded rappels, it's better to get down safely. If it gets dark, that's why we bring headlamps.

Everyone tells me that this was just bad luck. I feel I should take responsibility, because it was my decision to try and pass. I didn't have the foresight to see the risk of pulling the rappel rope onto off-route terrain. (Source: Anonymous Climber.)

***Editor's Note:** Kudos go to this climber who spoke up to take responsibility for this near miss. Crowding on popular routes is a reality and it is hazardous to start up a long route with a complex descent with multiple parties ahead. Consider other climbing options or make an earlier start.

Images



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Article Details

Author	Anonymous Climber
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	78
Page	
Copyright Date	2025
Article Type	Accident reports