



AAC Publications

Free Solo Falls

Colorado, Boulder, Flatirons

On December 16, the Boulder County Sheriff's Office received a report that 42-year-old Keith Hayes had not returned home that evening after going climbing. Around 9 p.m., friends of Hayes' found his body near the top of the Second Flatiron, after presumably falling while unroped from Freezeway (5.7). His friends reported no sign of snow or ice on the route and that there was no sign of broken rock contributing to the fall.

The next day, December 17, a 27-year-old male was reported missing after not returning home in the evening from a Flatirons climb. The Boulder Emergency Squad found the body of the missing male a day later, after also presumably falling unroped, on the Standard East Face route (5.4) on the Third Flatiron. Rocky Mountain Rescue Group recovered the body after an eight-plus-hour operation.

ANALYSIS

Freezeway is a steep alternate finish to the Second Flatiron after completing one of several easier, low-angle east face routes. Hayes was very experienced and had climbed this route without a rope many times prior to his fall. The Standard East Face of the Third Flatiron, meanwhile, is one of the most popular beginner climbs in the U.S. and is frequently climbed unroped (though many climbers bring along a rope for the rappels from the top).

The accidents were a shock to the local community. The timing of both fatalities gained national attention. These tragedies serve as a reminder of the inherent risks of free solo climbing. Experience and fitness do not guarantee survival, and familiarity can degrade attentiveness. (Sources: Friends of Keith Hayes and Bill Kinter.)

Images

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