



AAC Publications

Leader Dislodged Rock — Ground Fall, Struck by Falling Rock

Arizona, Sedona, Long Canyon–Deadman's Pass

In December 2025, photographer John Burcham fell and was struck by a falling rock. His helmet was destroyed but likely saved his life. Photo: The Burcham Family

On December 10, John Burcham, a Flagstaff-based photographer and climber with more than 30 years of experience, was attempting a new route, ground-up, in the Long Canyon–Deadman's Pass area of Sedona with his partner Seth Dyer. Dave Spies had joined them to shuttle gear to the base. It was the fourth day Burcham and Dyer had spent working the route.

While leading, Burcham dislodged a sub-pillar within the chimney without warning. He fell 40 feet, pulling all his protection, and landed at the base next to Dyer. A coffee-table-sized boulder followed him down and struck him, fracturing nearly every bone in his face. His helmet split longitudinally and broke at the rear but absorbed enough force to prevent fatal head trauma. The length of the fall and position of his partners suggests he was on the first pitch of their prospective climb.

Dyer and Spies immediately uncovered Burcham and provided first aid. Poor cell reception complicated the initial rescue call, and ground evacuation was impossible—the site was approximately four miles from the trailhead in terrain Sedona Fire District later described as “incredibly challenging.” A helicopter deployed by the Arizona Department of Public Safety used a 240-foot long-line—the only configuration that could reach them—and the operation took 4.5 hours. Burcham was flown to Flagstaff Medical Center's Level 1 Trauma Center.

He underwent two surgeries in the first four days; the second placed three plates and 21 screws. Burcham was diagnosed with traumatic brain injury. His long-term prognosis, including his vision, remains uncertain.

ANALYSIS

Sedona's sandstone is notoriously loose, and the remote location compounded the risk. Climbing ground-up affords no opportunity to inspect or dislodge loose rock, assess protection possibilities, or clean gear placements before leading. It also provides little knowledge of terrain above—critical when a rescue may need to come in from the top. The adventure of a ground-up first ascent can be deeply rewarding; in this case it was punitive.

The immediate response by Dyer and Spies, and their climbing skills, helped facilitate the rescue. The team was fortunate to have a cell signal. (Sources: Seth Dyer and Paul Guzman via mountainproject.com, the Burcham Family, Sedona Red Rock News, and KNAU.)

Images



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