



AAC Publications

Rappel Error — Dehydration, Darkness, Stuck Rope

Nevada, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Oak Creek Canyon, Solar Slab

On November 9, my partner and I (Declan West, 22) started hiking from the Middle Oak Creek trailhead at 5 a.m., and reached the base of Solar Slab Gully (500', 5.3) at 6:15 a.m. We racked up and started climbing the gully at 6:20 a.m. to access Solar Slab (1,500', 9 pitches, 5.6). For our climb, we took a total of three liters of fluid: two liters of water in a bladder and one liter of electrolyte mix in a bottle. This was an unusually hot day for November with a high of 80°F, and Solar Slab (as the name suggests) sits in the sun all day.

Two other parties—a group of three and a pair—started up after us. The party of three was climbing faster, so we let them pass. The pair simul-climbed the gully and passed us there, but we caught up at the intermediate anchor on pitch two where their leader took some time getting to the next anchor. My partner and I made it to the top of pitch seven of Solar Slab around 3 p.m. We were out of water. I was convinced we should rappel, but my partner convinced me to top out. This was a critical mistake. We climbed the final two pitches and topped out at 3:45 p.m. We then headed over to the Painted Bowl descent. It was straightforward but took some route-finding attention.

We made it down two rappels—we had double ropes—before it got dark. My partner's headlamp died immediately. My headlamp was working, but neither of us had done this descent before, which made traversing difficult and slow.

We were now both incredibly dehydrated. Farther down the walk-off, we came to a ledge that looked like it required a rappel, so we did one—unplanned, and rigged sketchily around a boulder that likely shifted as we simul-rapped. After we rappelled, to our horror, the rope was stuck. At that point we just wanted to go home, so it didn't seem like a problem to leave the rope in place to retrieve later.

It was clear that we were off route. We came to a serious downclimb, where we found a fixed nut from a previous party. Without a rope, this was one of the most nerve-racking moments of my climbing career. We made it down. Then, while hiking through the main wash, I rolled my right ankle on an unseen rock, later learning that I had fractured it—the dehydration had caught up with me. Despite my ankle pain, we were able to reach our packs at the base of Solar Slab Gully, where we'd left three liters of water. That gave us what we needed to hike out, and we reached our car at 10:30 p.m.

ANALYSIS

My partner and I were inexperienced at climbing big routes. Though we did not retreat when we had the option at the top of pitch seven, we should have. We did not bring enough water for the full day of climbing, including the descent. We did not check our headlamp batteries before leaving. We had not previously done the descent before, so doing it in the dark was an unnecessary risk. Finally, I broke my ankle because I was not paying attention to my footing.

I had four years of climbing experience, over three of it being trad. Still, knowing when to retreat, having descent beta, and bringing enough water would have prevented this accident. Being flexible with our objective when other parties slowed us on the route also would have helped. (Source: Declan West.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Declan West
Publication	ANAM
Volume	14
Issue	1
Page	
Copyright Date	2026
Article Type	Accident reports