



AAC Publications

Stranded — Climber Stuck Mid-Rappel, Climbers Unable to Rappel

New York, Shawangunks, Trapps Area

On August 23, my rangers responded to a climber assist on Betty (2 pitches, 5.3). A father and his teenage daughter (approximately 16) had completed the route with the daughter leading. She was a more experienced climber than her father.

After topping out, she rappelled first. Her rope tangled below her and jammed against her rappel device, leaving her suspended ten feet above the second rappel anchor. Her father waited above and eventually dialed 911. My ranger reached him by phone and asked whether the rope was running through the bottom rings of the rappel chains. The father didn't know what that meant, which told us everything we needed to know. Rangers lowered the daughter to the second anchor, and she rappelled to the ground; the father was lowered as well.

Three weeks later, on September 15, the same family was back on Three Pines (3 pitches, 5.3), now accompanied by the daughter's younger brother. Again, the daughter led, rappelled first, and reached the second rappel anchor on Grand Traverse Ledge. Her father and brother called 911 because they didn't feel comfortable rappelling. Rangers went to the top of the cliff and walked them off the back side. The daughter was assisted through her remaining rappels by other climbers on the route. The family was reunited at the base.

ANALYSIS

Two rescues in three weeks on two different routes, of the same family. Both times, the daughter led competently; both times, the father couldn't manage the descent and on the second rescue the brother was also incapable of rappelling. The second incident required no technical work, but it consumed ranger time and 911 resources that could have been needed elsewhere.

The daughter was competent in leading both routes, and in one case managed her own descent. The problem was structural: She was the sole experienced climber in the group. Individual competence can't substitute for shared competence. Everyone must manage their own systems.

I have a lot of respect for this young woman. But leading family members who are unable to rappel multi-pitch routes puts everyone at risk. The father should consider hiring a guide to learn basic skills. (Source: Dan Cassidy, Chief Ranger at Mohonk Preserve.)

Images

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