Stranded — No Light Source, Unable to Locate Rappel

North Carolina, Pisgah National Forest, Looking Glass Rock, South Side

At approximately 7:50 a.m. on December 22, the Transylvania County Rescue Squad was dispatched to the Sun Wall area of Looking Glass Rock to search for a pair of overdue male climbers who had spent an unplanned night on the wall. The pair had last made contact at 1 a.m. with an emergency contact, reporting that they were stranded roughly 200 feet up Looking Glass, somewhere, after having completed the Sun Wall route Titties and Beer (5 pitches, 5.10a). They asked that SAR not be called until morning.

A drone search failed to locate the climbers. A hasty team went to the top of Looking Glass for a search, while additional teams deployed to the South Side areas. Two specialized climber/rescuer teams were also deployed. At approximately 10:10 a.m., rescuers made verbal contact with the climbers in the trees above the South Side area. Rescuers climbed 200 feet to reach them. Both were found uninjured—they had survived freezing temperatures by stuffing their clothing with leaves.

Additional rescuers climbed to 60 feet to establish an intermediate anchor to create a lowering system. Both climbers were brought to the ground, evaluated by medical personnel, and transported to their vehicle.

ANALYSIS

The climbers were adequately equipped for the route but started late in the day and failed to bring a reliable light source or warm clothing. After completing the climb, they traversed right in search of the rappel descent and became unable to locate it in the dark. To their credit, they made the sound decision to stop moving once night fell, avoiding a potentially much worse outcome.

Their improvised insulation—stuffing clothing with dry leaves—was a legitimate survival technique that helped trap warm air in their clothes and likely prevented hypothermia. Short winter days and long cold nights demand a headlamp, backup light source, and extra insulation layers on any multi-pitch route. (Sources: Transylvania County Rescue Squad, Karsten Delap, and the Editors.)

Images

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