



AAC Publications

Unroped Fall From Alpine Ridge

California, Sierra Nevada, Bear Creek Spire

On the afternoon of September 18, a two-person party was near the summit of Bear Creek Spire (13,726 feet) after climbing the east ridge, one of the longest routes in the Sierra (5.8 and more than 20 pitches, if the entire route is belayed). Although the party carried a rope and had used it for some of the more difficult sections of the route, they were unroped as they approached the summit. Leading the way was Maria Birukova, a 26-year-old, experienced climber with a number of California alpine routes under her belt. A large portion of rock “broke from under her feet” and she fell approximately 800 to 1,000 feet. Her body was recovered by search and rescue personnel two days later. (Sources: Inyo County SAR report, Supertopo, Rock and Ice.)

ANALYSIS

This is the first report we’ve published about an accident on the east ridge of Bear Creek Spire. Although regarded as a good route, it’s not as popular as the peak’s northeast ridge or the north arête, and a number of trip reports note the rock quality being poorer than on the more popular lines. The terrain was well within the victim’s abilities and experience level. It’s possible that incoming weather or the lateness of the day influenced the climbers’ decisions to climb unroped through relatively easy terrain.

Long alpine ridges frequently require alternating between a number of techniques, including climbing unroped, simul-climbing, and belaying individual pitches. There are risks with each approach, and climbers must balance the relative safety of each versus the pressures of time and weather as they move up a route. Shortening the rope with a “Kiwi coil” (see photo) can allow climbers to move together over complex terrain and still place intermediate protection or use natural features for protection against a catastrophic fall, without creating excess rope drag or rockfall danger. Some trip reports indicate the final section of Bear Creek Spire’s east ridge can be climbed using a “picket fence” method to weave the rope among natural rock features, protecting to a degree. (Source: The Editors.)

FATAL UNROPED FALLS ON EVOLUTION TRAVERSE AND IN KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK: In early September, Julia Mackenzie, 30, fell during an attempt on the Evolution Traverse, likely because of a loose hold. She was climbing with a partner but was unroped. In mid-September, Alfred Kwok, 50, was discovered to have fallen on the upper southwest face of Deerhorn Mountain during a solo backcountry trip. The exact circumstances of these fatal falls are not known.

Images



The “Kiwi coil” shortens the rope while maintaining a strong connection to the harness. There are several variations, but all of them tie off the coils to the belay loop.

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