



AAC Publications

Shawangunks Annual Summary

New York, Mohonk Preserve

In 2020 the Mohonk Preserve experienced a statistically anomalous year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For two months, the land was closed to visitors and no access passes were sold. When the preserve was open, there was a significant increase in non-climbing day passes. Meanwhile, the access passes that allow climbing saw a marked decrease, especially from the shutdown until October (when the numbers returned to pre-pandemic levels.) These changes are reflected in the report below. Mohonk Preserve rangers responded to 11 climbing-related accidents in 2020. (By contrast, there were 22 reported accidents in 2019 and 23 in 2018.) There was one fatality. The other accidents resulted in two head injuries, five lower-leg injuries, one pelvic fracture, and assorted minor lacerations. One rappelling climber was bitten by a copperhead and was evacuated after safely getting themselves to the carriage road. Five climbing incidents required technical rescue, and two of those were high-angle. Rangers were also deployed seven other times for technical rescue in non-climbing accidents from difficult terrain.

The fatality occurred on the route Triple Bulges, a 5.6 route in the Trapps. The leader was approximately 90 feet above the Guide's Wall Ledge, and had placed several pieces of protection along their route. Here, at one of the crux sections over a small roof, the leader placed at least one more camming device (it was recovered after the incident and did not appear to have been clipped to the rope.) The leader fell from this point, and several camming devices pulled out of the rock, failing to arrest the fall before the leader struck a ledge 20 feet above their belayer. Nearby climbers and rangers responded quickly, but the resulting technical work was a recovery.

In two other accidents, lead climbers had protection pieces fail in falls, but were protected from more serious injury by lower elements of the system. One leader placed a camming unit and then fell before clipping it. The quick actions of their belayer and the lower pieces minimized the injuries sustained (see report below).

One leader fell a short distance at the start of the first pitch of Annie Oh! (5.8+) in the Trapps and suffered a tibia/fibula fracture. Despite the climber being close to the ground, responding rangers devised a high-angle lower to get the seriously injured person down from a ledge only accessible by 4th-class movement.

A rappeler attempting to access the anchor bolts at the top of Bunny (5.4) used an unknown method to attach their rope to a small pitch pine tree on top of the cliff. (The anchor bolts are 20 feet below the walkable cliff top.) When the rappeler weighted the system, the rope unraveled from the tree and they fell 15 feet to a sloping ledge above the bolts (and far off the ground.) Rangers completed a high-angle rescue to reach the climber and lower them to the carriage road.

One climber was involved in a non-climbing accident that resulted in severe head and back injuries when the hammock they were attempting to enter broke apart. The hammock had been suspended from trees over a steep talus field. Mohonk Preserve rules do not allow hammocks to be attached to trees.

ANALYSIS

Accidents on the Mohonk Preserve dropped 50 percent from the previous climbing season. There are several theoretical explanations for this. Perhaps there were fewer climbers overall (as noted in the statistics that are mentioned above). Perhaps the climbers who decided to come to the Preserve were more conservative in their objectives and risk management or they represented a more experienced segment of the climbing population at large.

One notable observation is that a majority of the incidents in 2020 were the result of climber error. Absent are reports of rockfall-related accidents, and there was only one event that involved environmental dangers (a snakebite). Also absent from years past are stranded climbers who found themselves unprepared or off route.

This overview of the incidents that occurred in the Mohonk Preserve serves as a reminder to stay up to date on the variety of skills necessary to be safe, even in an area with very convenient access. (Source: Mohonk Preserve Rangers, Andrew Bajardi, Chief Ranger.)

Images

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