



AAC Publications

Stranded – incorrect Anchor, Stuck Rappel Ropes

Utah, Castle Valley, Castleton Tower, West Face

Just after sunset on December 4, two male climbers (ages 32 and 36) called 911 to report they were stranded halfway down 400-foot Castleton Tower because their rappel ropes had become stuck.

Starting near sunrise, the pair had climbed the Kor-Ingalls Route (5.9) on the tower's south side. They topped out later than expected, with about an hour and a half of daylight left.

Armed with guidebook photos and online beta, they planned to descend via the standard North Face rappels. The two saw a beefy new anchor on top of the northwest corner of the tower and decided this must be the first rappel anchor. Tying two 70-meter ropes together, the first rappeler descended about 200 feet and spotted a bolted anchor 25 feet to his right, but no other suitable anchor before the ends of the ropes. No longer in voice contact with his partner, he ascended a short distance and moved right to reach the bolted anchor. It appeared that one more double-rope rappel would get them to the ground. Once both climbers reached the mid-face anchor, they attempted to pull the ropes. Despite applying full body weight to the pull line, they could not get the ropes to budge.

Contemplating ascending the stuck rope, the climbers realized the other strand had swung out of reach across a blank face. The climbers agreed that recovering the other strand was not safe or practical, nor was climbing the unknown chimney above them in the dark. The climbers were aware the temperature was expected to drop to 15°F overnight, so they made the call for a rescue. They were prepared with a headlamp, warm jackets, handwarmers, and an emergency bivy sack.

A team of three rescuers from Grand County Search and Rescue was transported to the summit via helicopter. One rescuer rappelled to the subjects around 9 p.m. and assisted them in rappelling to the base of the tower.

ANALYSIS

The rescuers discovered the climbers had mistakenly rappelled from an anchor used to rig a 500-meter highline (slackline) to the neighboring Rectory formation. Instead of rappelling the North Face, as planned, the climbers had ended up on the less-traveled West Face route (5.11). Because the highline anchors were not intended for rappelling, friction made it impossible for the climbers to pull their ropes.

The climbing party identified a number of decisions that could have prevented this misadventure. Had they abandoned the climb and rappelled the Kor-Ingalls Route earlier, they probably would have been down before sunset. Even after finishing the route, heading back down the Kor-Ingalls would have had the advantage of familiarity with the anchor stations, rather than rappelling into unknown territory. Lastly, while the highline anchor is quite visible atop the tower, its configuration, set back from the cliff edge with very short chain links, indicates it is not appropriate for a rappel. The climbers may have felt rushed with the setting sun and dropping temperature, but if they had looked more thoroughly, they likely would have found the North Face rappel station, about 30 feet away on top of the tower. This anchor's bolts have three or four feet of chain that extend over the edge and attach to large rappel rings, making for an easy pull.

After word got out about these stranded climbers, a local guide removed the chain links from the

highline anchor to discourage future incidents. (The links can easily be reinstalled to rig the highline.) There is a plan to attach plaques identifying the bolts as a highline anchor. (Sources: The climbers, Grand County SAR, and the Editors.)

EDITOR'S NOTE: It is common for minor mishaps to cascade into a call for rescue. Had the climbers noticed they did not seem to be rappelling in the correct place, they might have been more cautious about maintaining control of both ends of the rappel ropes. A test pull after the first climber descended also could have revealed the problem, allowing the upper climber to extend the anchor with slings or the lower climber to ascend the ropes and return to the top. Once a rope gets stuck at an anchor above, climbers can decide whether to ascend the rope, lead climb up to the anchor, cut the rope and descend with the remaining rope, or call for help. The last option may have been the only one left for these climbers to get off the tower safely.

As highlines, BASE jumps, and space nets grow in popularity, the number of nonclimbing bolted anchors at cliffs is on the rise, and rescues like this one are becoming more prevalent. In fact, this is the second stranding resulting from an attempted rappel off this same highline anchor in five years. Study the published descriptions of anchor locations, and be aware that guidebooks and online references may not list nonclimbing anchors. If an anchor does not appear to be rigged properly for rappelling—especially on a very popular formation like Castleton Tower—look around and consider the options before committing to the rappel.

Images



The highline rigging bolts atop Castleton Tower that climbers mistakenly used for a rappel.



Bolts installed to anchor a highline atop the northwest corner of Castleton Tower, Utah. The correct rappel station is about 30 feet to the right.

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