

National Park. (See previous issues of ANAM.) (Source: Jim Detterline, Longs Peak Supervisory Climbing Ranger, Rocky Mountain National Park)

“UNFOUNDED”

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Longs Peak

On July 7, 1993, at 2152, HAM radio operator Scott Kimball contacted Rocky Mountain National Park dispatch via a HAM base station operator in Wellington, Colorado. Kimball reported from the Boulder Field campsites area on Longs Peak that a party of three persons was stranded on the North Face (Cables) Route of Longs Peak and that they were yelling for help. He said that the party had lights but that they had gone out. Ranger Jim Detterline sent a party of three rangers to the scene. They left Longs Peak Trailhead at 2400 and worked their way to the Boulder Field in a severe lightning/thunderstorm. At 0350, Detterline contacted the Tammy Backenstose party of three, who had been identified as the stranded climbers. They admitted that they were noisy but did not request help. They were slow but came down on their own power and passed the reporting party at the Boulder Field. However, the reporting party declined to recontact the park that the situation was terminated. The Backenstose party had missed the rescue team because the rescue team went up the Jim's Grove cut-off in order to respond quickly to the scene, which was 6.5 miles from the trailhead.

Analysis

A combination of confusing circumstances due both to the reporting party and the slow climbers resulted in an expensive and false response by the park rescue team. The use of HAM radios, other portable radios, and cellular phones to initiate rescue responses on Longs Peak has become increasingly popular on Longs Peak since 1986, and has resulted in several lives saved. However, once someone has initiated a rescue, it is that individual's responsibility to, at the very least, inform the park service of any major changes in the situation such as completion of a self-rescue. The witnesses at the Boulder Field, according to the climbers, declined to mention that a rescue for them had been initiated. In reviewing the actions of the climbing party, there are several problems here. The North Face route was obviously beyond their abilities to complete within daylight hours, at least as they had planned their trip with three on a rope and within one day. Especially serious was their poor conduct on the rappels, as their yelling initiated a false rescue response. (Source: Jim Detterline, Longs Peak Supervisory Climbing Ranger, Rocky Mountain National Park)

(Editor's Note: Rocky Mountain National Park had a total of 132 "overdue" parties, 16 of which were technical climbers. Of this total, 34 required SAR. Nine of those were technical climbers, eight of them categorized as minor (less than \$500). This park, like most others, experiences a number of "unfounded" call outs. Yosemite reported that for 1993, 22 percent of the SARs were "unfounded." Expensive!

Costs for the six major climber rescues, and the nine minor ones accounted for 55 percent of the dollar costs—\$19,000—in Rocky Mountain National Park. This is in contrast to Yosemite National Park, in which the costs for climber SAR—\$64,000—was 16.5 percent of the total. One hiker search alone in Yosemite cost \$134,000. Unfortunately, "unfounded" and hiker incidents end up being recorded as "mountaineering" or "mountain related" by such agencies as the National Safety Council, as well as the media.)