

it to the rope. This possibility is not proven, but those pre-conditions have been found in a few previous ascender-related accidents in Yosemite, and we have been able to twist ascenders off the rope in simulated traverses in this manner. This is easily prevented by the user pushing the ascender parallel to the rope after attaching it and visually checking that the cam and safety catch have fully seated. Carabiners may also be clipped to the Petzl Ascension to keep the rope parallel. A second “failure” mechanism, of course, is when the user has simply forgotten to release the cam from the fully open position, and other mechanisms may exist.

We also do not know why the lower ascender came off. A web search for “ascender failure” leads to one claim of a Petzl releasing when the safety catch rubbed against the rock, but to properly relate this to Dave’s case we would have to recreate the events, with Dave’s rigging (and Dave), at the same location on Mescalito. Petzl’s own instructions cover risks and proper use of their ascenders in illustrated detail and should be understood by every user.

We could fill another page in this article speculating about how Dave wound up on two different ropes and why he fell, but in the end, Dave has the best advice: “Tie in short, double-check everything, and recognize the symptoms of summit fever.” (Source: Steve Gomez, Eric Sorenson, Dave Goodwin, and John Dill, NPS Ranger)

STRANDED ON DESCENT – UNABLE TO ASCEND ROPE, INADEQUATE SELF-RESCUE SKILLS, COMMUNICATIONS PROBLEMS OVER DISTANCE

California, Yosemite Valley, Sons of Yesterday

On June 29, Curt (26) and Sherri (29) (pseudonyms) climbed Serenity Crack (three pitches, 5.10d). From the top of Serenity they continued up Sons of Yesterday (six pitches, 5.10a), and then began rappelling the same line on double ropes. They reached the top of the first pitch of Sons (the bolts at the base of the long jam crack) in early afternoon and Curt descended first on the next rappel. As he neared the top of Serenity (the top of pitch 3), he saw that he had enough rope to reach the next anchor, so he called up to Sherri, told her his plan, and continued down to the top of pitch 2. Once there, he could not see or talk with Sherri, two pitches above, so he released tension on the rope and gave three tugs, their signal for her to rappel.

Curt discovered during his rappel that from their anchor on Sons the fall-line slanted distinctly left of his descent line, dropping over a steep corner onto the Superslide face to the west. Therefore, he had to deliberately tension to the right as he descended. He neglected to warn Sherri, assuming she would see the proper line and deal with it adequately. As she rappelled, Curt heard her start sliding along the rock and knew she was swinging left. She was barefoot, so once she lost her footing she couldn’t regain it and she slid until she was hanging free, over the corner.

Curt still had the ends of the ropes, which ran up, left, and around the corner. He couldn't see what was on the other side, but Sherri was probably still 80 feet above and to his left. He tried pulling her toward him to where she could get herself around the corner and back onto the Serenity face, but there was too much friction. He decided to let go of the ends of the ropes. That left him marooned at the pitch 2 anchor, but it made it easier for Sherri to do whatever was necessary to get back up. At that point they could communicate somewhat by shouting, but Curt didn't realize that she was hanging free. Although the area is very popular, they saw no other climbers on Serenity or Superslide to help them.

To get out of their jam, Sherri would have to ascend her ropes until she was above the lip and high enough on the face that she could swing back onto the correct line. (It would also help if she put her shoes back on for friction.) She had slings with which to fashion Prusiks or other ascender hitches, but she didn't know how to tie them and had never ascended a rope that way. Curt tried to talk her through it but failed because of the poor communication conditions.

Sherri continued her rappel onto the Superslide face. Now she could see and talk with Curt but there was no way to link up, so she found natural anchors, continued to the ground, and called the Park Service. Two rescuers climbed Serenity Crack so Curt could descend.

Analysis

The route topo, which Curt and Sherri had taken up the climb, warns about the risk of swinging left on that rappel. If you spot such a hazard, as Curt did, don't assume your partner will see it. If the issue is significant, point it out and keep the rappels short for better communications. But stuff happens despite your best efforts, so it pays to have the skills to get yourself out of trouble. Re-ascending the rope as soon as she took the slider would have put Sherri back on track (with a bit of sweat), but despite six years of experience and leading multi-pitch trad at the 5.9–5.10 level, she did not know how to safely ascend a rope. Overall, this was a pretty minor incident, but a slight change of scene—instead of only 300 yards from Yosemite Village—might have left them both stranded.

[Technical Note: I hate to see climbing come to this, but if they'd both had cell phones and service, Curt could have sent instructional photos to Sherri on the spot. A pair of FRS radios is the next best solution, but having self-rescue skills beats both options.] (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, and Curt)

FALL ON ROCK, FREE-SOLOING

California, Yosemite – Tuolumne Meadows, Cathedral Peak

On the afternoon of July 9th, rangers received a report that a climber had fallen approximately 400 to 500 feet while descending the Eichorn Pinnacle