

FALLING ROCKS – BROKE AWAY FROM ROUTES

Pennsylvania, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, Mount Minsi, Mount Tammany

There were three climbing incidents reported from this area.

The first report was of a fall on a route called Raptor of the Steep (5.10) on Mount Minsi. Dan O'Malley was about 25 feet above a belay site. His partner Tim Feitzinger watched him make a move to climb up on a large rock. The rock teetered and then came free from the face, knocking O'Malley backward and off the mountain. The rock nearly hit Feitzinger. While he was busy avoiding the rock, he lost track of O'Malley. Then he realized that O'Malley was not on belay because the rock had severed the rope. A third partner, Jeff Sukenick, began efforts to get help for O'Malley, who was seriously injured. Sukenick and Feitzinger, and then two paramedics, were unable to revive O'Malley.

In July on Mount Tammany, Laura Glockeler was ascending a fixed rope when she began to pendulum. She reached for a large rock and it broke off, crushing her left arm in the process. She required reattachment surgery, which was successful.

In August on Mount Minsi, another accident involved a fall to a ledge as a result of a rock (foothold) coming loose. The climber, Dr. Mike Sinclair, fell about 20 feet onto a ledge. His injuries included a pneumothorax, torn cervical ligament, several fractures (T5&6, ribs, hip), lacerations, and a concussion. He survived, thanks to a technical rescue effort involving a dozen people. During the rescue, part of the ledge gave way, and while a rescuer below was trying to run from possible harm, he broke his ankle. (Source: Incident Reports submitted by Delaware Water Gap NRA)

FALLING ICE – UNSTABLE ROUTE, MISJUDGED CONDITIONS

Utah, Sastaquin Canyon

We had a five-day warm spell followed by a weak cold front for 36 hours prior to the climb. Overnight temperatures had been well below freezing, so the ice was brittle.

We climbed the approach pitch to the first ledge. From here we could see the pillar hung mostly free for about 50 feet, almost touching the ground. A week earlier, this route was barely touching the ground and had been climbed. Now there was a crack and four inches of space near the ground showing that the pillar had retracted in response to the weather conditions. Looking at the ice structure caused my partner and me to comment on its apparent instability. She was convinced it was unsafe and suggested that we climb a different route. I had climbed this route in a different year when it was not touching down, though its dimensions looked less stable this day. I climbed up without really swinging my tools, either hooking or tapping my picks in on the bottom overhang, then chimneying between the ice and the rock, once that was possible. There is a bolted line on the rock behind the pillar that is a dry tool variation. I had clipped in to one bolt about 25 feet from the ground. About 40 feet up, I felt like I was past the most unstable part. I was near the place where the ice attached to the rock about ten feet above

me. The pillar was about six feet in diameter. The second bolt I wanted to clip in to was not an easy reach, so I swung my pick into the ice with intentions of reaching the bolt by leaning off a secure pick placement. But the placement caused a clean shear across the pillar, propagating instantly from the point of contact. I fell a split second behind the falling pillar due to the friction of my butt against the rock. Right above the ground, I was arrested by the rope, but I was not spared the shower of large ice chunks. I ended up with broken ribs and shoulder and a deeply bruised leg. My wife was belaying 50 feet to the side, tied to a tree. It took us about three hours to get to the car, usually a half hour jaunt.

Analysis

The warming trend had probably created a lot of tension in the ice underneath its point of attachment. The cold night had made the ice brittle, so long, running fractures were more likely. The danger was fairly obvious. The lapse was in my perception of my ability to deal with the danger. I was too focused on doing this particular route. Also, I was complacent because I had climbed many similar structures with no mishap.

In hindsight, I can see I was lucky to get away with relatively minor injuries. My choice to climb an unstable route endangered the follower, since she could have caused the entire structure to collapse near the bottom, which would be almost certain death. (Source: Seth Shaw)

FALLING ROCK, FAILURE TO TEST HOLDS, LEADER'S LAPSE LEAD TO MISJUDGMENT

Utah, Uinta Mountains – Between Gunsight Pass and Kings Peak

On June 29, Lucy (42), a beginning climber, was climbing above the leader (71) on an ascent near Kings Peak. She tried to stand on a precarious cluster of rocks and managed to dislodge four of them, varying in weight from an estimated 50 to 1,400 pounds. This resulted in a fractured ankle, multiple abrasions and lacerations, and a sprained knee.

Her leg was pinned under one rock, which had to be levered off. The ensuing rescue was complicated by the victim's husband being in psychogenic shock and giving the wrong location of the accident to rangers via phone.

Analysis

Being slower at age 71 and on a remarkably stable slope, I allowed a novice climber to climb above me. Always enforce discipline with inexperienced members of climbing group. Never allow novices to lead unless closely controlled for training, even if terrain is apparently ultra easy. Anticipate surprise obstacles. (Source: Stan Sattelberg)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, PROTECTION PULLED, FATIGUE, WEATHER, INEXPERIENCE

Vermont, Nichol's Ledge

On October 22, Ian (22) and Ryan (23) were attempting to climb the first pitch of a two-pitch route unfamiliar to both. Ian was leading and Ryan was belaying. The weather that day was cloudy, cool (40s), and windy. The first pitch of