

PULLED ROCK OFF—FALL ON ROCK, FAILURE TO TEST HOLDS, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

Oregon, Smith Rock State Park, Misery Ridge Mesa

On October 17, Brent Bishop (19) and his friend Jason (19) were scrambling the fourth class route to the top of the Misery Ridge Mesa at Smith Rock State Park when Brent pulled loose a hand hold near the top of the climb. He fell about 40 feet, breaking his leg and cutting his scalp. 911 was quickly called. Redmond Fire and Rescue assisted by Deschutes County Search and Rescue approached from the Crooked River below the Gully and performed a high angle rope and stretcher rescue descent to a wheeled stretcher and a waiting ambulance.

Analysis

Brent, who has been bouldering for a while, says he wants to learn to climb with ropes. He says he has more respect for fourth class climbing following his accident.

This is one of several scrambling accidents at Smith Rock. The volcanic scree and friable rock in various locations in the State Park contribute to many calls for assistance from Park Rangers and Rescue units. (Source: Robert Speik)

FALLING ROCK

Utah, Arches National Park

On March 7, a large rockfall occurred during a technical rock rescue training session being conducted in the Park. Seventeen people were attending the training. The rock, estimated to be between 30 and 40 feet long and weighing over one ton, fell nearly 300 feet from the top of a sandstone cliff. It struck a small protrusion near the beginning of its fall, causing a loud noise, then broke up on its way down. The noise alerted six people who were directly below, sitting down to take a lunch break. They scattered just before the rock hit the ground a few yards behind the lunch location and exploded. Two park employees were injured. Andrew Fitzgerald was knocked to the ground by flying debris and suffered a head injury and multiple lacerations; Lee Kaiser, who was not among the six, injured his leg slightly while trying to get away from the flying rock. Fitzgerald was treated for his injuries, secured to a litter, lowered over the side of a 100-foot cliff to a second team, then transported a quarter-mile cross-country to a waiting ambulance. His injuries turned out to be relatively minor, and he was released from the hospital later that afternoon.

Analysis

Rain had fallen off and on for several days prior to the training session. Examination of the release site at the top of the cliff revealed that a large sandstone flake had simply let go of the surrounding rock. The rain-weakened condition of the sandstone, an existing crack in the rock, and freeze-thaw conditions typical of late winter in the area are thought to have been the primary reasons for the natural release. The high-angle rock rescue training is a joint NPS and Grand County SAR session conducted annually before the visitor season begins. Those who were directly below the falling rock with Fitzgerald, and therefore had a "near death experience," were Murray Shoemaker and Nathan Plants from Arches National Park, Dan Habig from Canyonlands National Park, and

Bego Gerhart and Frank Mendonca of Grand County SAR. (Source: Jim Webster, Ranger, Arches National Park)

(Editor's Note: Engaging in "area security" helps to determine conditions that may have changed for many venues. In climbing, routes may change as a result of freeze/thaw cycles—both for rock and ice. Knowing the history of the snow pack is critical for understanding potential avalanche conditions.)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

Utah, Indian Creek

During the first week of April, Paul Sullivan, Ian Herring, Matt Pinkley, Bill Saul, and I (40) hit the ground running on our first day. Really, Matt and I had never been in an environment like "Wall Street" near Moab, Utah, and we hit the first crack we came to like kids in a candy shop. At Wall Street the cliff comes right down to the road so the approach is, basically, opening the car door. We all climbed until the light started to fail and camped at twilight.

Next day we ran down to Indian Creek and got on some classics including Super Crack and Generic Crack. The climbing was so good that we decided to stay where we were for another day. On the third day we got on a number of hard routes (thanks to Bill Saul) including The Incredible Hand Crack. Towards the end of the afternoon I loaned some of my bigger pieces to a team climbing Keyhole Flake so they could get safely by the three-inch crack at the mid-section of the climb. As soon as they were down, I got on the climb with Matt belaying. The first quarter is a flake, and from about 30 feet up it consists of two parallel splitter cracks. I had placed my third piece, climbed over it, and set two cams behind the flake above me. I pulled up slack to clip, and that is the last I remember of the climb.

No flaming, no, "Watch me!" I flat out peeled without a warning and with an armload of slack. When the weight ("m") of my body had accelerated ("a") through the slack and the distance, I was above my last piece, and the force ("F") was too much for the placements behind the flake and they popped. $F=ma$. As far as I can figure, the top piece dragged out through the sandstone after giving Matt a good tug and the second blew out completely, as it was very small. I hit a ledge a couple of feet off of the ground, shattering my right fibula into a few pieces and breaking my ankle. I basically broke my foot off of the bottom of the tibia at the ankle. The last few feet of the fall was taken on my back and head. The impact of my head on the ground actually smashed in the back on my helmet and gave me a nasty cut as well as a concussion. (When I looked in the mirror later, I had a black and blue imprint of a #4 Camalot on my lower back.)

When I regained consciousness, my foot was pointing about 90 degrees from normal, someone was holding my bloody head, and the pain was excruciating. I really cannot describe how much it hurt. While my partners said I was unconscious for less than two minutes, I remember about an hour total of the first six or eight hours after the fall. Either the blow to the head or my body trying to deal with the pain shut my memory down. Two people headed off in opposite directions looking for cell phone coverage to call 911 while someone