

VARIOUS FALLS ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLING, FALLING ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

New York, Shawangunks

In addition to the above accident in the Gunks, there were 24 other reports, of which 17 are counted as climbing for purposes of this journal. Fourteen involved leader falls, and eight of those were the result of inadequate protection. Several of the falls occurred just after starting from the ground. Three injuries resulted from bouldering falls. There were a few incidents that resulted in injuries from falling rock as well. The average age of the climbers directly involved was 35, and most of the routes were of moderate difficulty. (Source: From reports submitted by the Mohonk Preserve)

LIGHTNING

North Carolina, Linville Gorge Wilderness, The Amphitheater, Daddy

In August, a party of two were climbing the Daddy (5.6) a classic 5-pitch route located in the Amphitheater, Linville Gorge Wilderness Area. The incident started when the lead climber (LC) was 65 feet above the large traverse ledge located on the third pitch of the route, when he suddenly found himself unable to climb upwards (he was climbing on double ropes). He yelled to his belayer (B) who was positioned on the ledge, with no response. LC then yanked on the rope to get B's attention, again without response. LC looked down and saw B lying face down on the ledge. LC rappelled down, and found B regaining consciousness with blood on his face. His head was ok as he was wearing a helmet. LC secured his partner and with 70m of additional rope rappelled to the ground and made his way to the trailhead for help. On his way out, LC ran into climbers Gary and Carol on the Jonas Ridge trail. Carol left the area to call for assistance. Both the North Carolina Outward Bound School and Burke County EMS responded.

In the meantime, LC and Gary walked to a position on the rim of the Amphitheater almost directly across from the route Daddy, where Gary was able to make brief verbal contact with B. After making contact with B, both LC and Gary traversed east around the top of the Amphitheater in worsening weather (by now it was raining hard) to the top of Daddy. Gary rappelled down to the ledge to assist B only to find him gone! All that remained on the ledge was the belay anchor high in the crack and a cut rope. Gary ascended his rope back to the top of the climb.

Because of the heavy rain, B became concerned about hypothermia and took matters into his own hands; he rappelled to the ground and climbed the fourth class descent gully out of the Amphitheater where he was eventually met by a member of the hasty team. He was able to walk out of the area unassisted.

After two CAT scans and retrospectively putting the clues together, B believes that he was struck by lightning. In trying to piece together the incident, he remembered that one of his shoes had been blown off his foot.

He also had a blistered left foot, blackened toes, and remembers hearing a “popping” sound before going into unconsciousness. He said, “Last time I heard that sound, I was close to a lightning strike.”

Analysis

After putting the clues together, B hypothesized that he was zapped by what a friend described as a phenomena known as “ball” lighting. It apparently exhibits buzzing sounds but no flash and precedes storms. Late day thunderstorms are a common summer occurrence in North Carolina. Climbers can prepare themselves by getting an early start and recognizing the signs of a potential thunderstorm. Familiarization with the appropriate tactics and techniques to help mitigate potential lightning strike will also be helpful.

During the quick hike to the top of the route, I (Gary) began thinking that many of my partners and my own self-rescue skills have become rusty or lost due to disuse. I urge all traditional climbers to learn, practice, and keep these skills current. As climbers, we should be capable of rescuing ourselves or other climbers and not rely solely on local rescue services. The North Carolina Outward Bound School, however, is consistently competent and should always be contacted in the Linville Gorge area as they are one of the primary SAR groups in the vicinity. Their support that day is appreciated, as is the quick response of the Burke Co. EMS. (Source: Gary Butler, from a posting on the Carolina Climbers Coalition Website www.carolinaclimbers.org, August 13, 2004, Kristian Jackson, NCOBS, and Aram Attarian).

FALL OR SLIP ON ROCK, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

North Carolina, Pilot Mountain State Park

On September 5, Paul Bridges (PB) and Alex Rodriguez (AR) were rappelling in Pilot Mountain State Park, which is located approximately 25 miles north of Winston Salem. After both had rappelled several times during the morning, they decided to do a little “climbing.” Leaving their rappelling equipment behind, they moved down the trail to the base of the climbing area and began to free-solo an unknown route. As AR was attempting to move up onto a ledge, he lost his grip and fell a few feet to a ledge below injuring his ankles. After hitting this ledge, he tumbled down the rockface to the trail below, receiving additional injuries. PB believes AR fell approximately 12 to 15 feet.

Pilot Knob Fire Department, Pilot Mountain Rescue Squad, Surry County EMS and the Interagency High Angle Rescue Team all responded. AR was placed in a Stokes basket and hauled up the main descent gully. He was carried out and transported to the hospital, where his injuries were evaluated. He sustained two broken ankles, a fractured right tibia and fibula, broken and dislocated fingers and torn tendons on his left hand. He also cracked ribs and several stitches were required to close a head wound! As of September 10, AR has undergone several surgeries, and still awaiting more.