

FALLING ROCK—FOOTHOLD CAME OFF

New Hampshire, Cannon Cliff, Moby Grape

On September 2, my climbing partner Jon Sykes and I had gotten an alpine start to climb on Cannon Cliff hoping to beat the weather coming in with hurricane Ernesto. I was aid-climbing up the first pitch of One Drop of Water and was only 15 feet from the ledge I hoped to use as a belay when I heard that sound every Cannon climber fears: rockfall. I immediately looked to my right and saw a large pile of rock dislodge from low on the cliff and a climber's rope come tight. Jon and I started yelling to see if they were OK and got the reply we expected, "Help!!" I abandoned my climb and got down as quickly as possible, but setting a good anchor and rappelling seems to take a very long time when there is an emergency. I finally reached the ground and joined Jon and the other climbers.

Mike had been leading the original first pitch of Moby Grape. He had climbed up about 30 feet and got his first piece of gear, a large cam, in a good crack. He then climbed another 15 feet and was standing on a large piece of rock when it gave way under his weight. The largest chunk was under him, but there were other smaller rocks bouncing around. His gear held him as he fell onto it, but it seems one of the fragments of rock hit his leg, leaving a large gash close to the bone on his lower left leg. The largest piece, surfboard shaped, about the size of a sofa and one-and-a-half-feet thick, came straight down and lodged itself between two boulders. The rest of the fragments showered off to the left avoiding the direct path to the belayer.

The rescue that followed is the reason I write this story. I was impressed at how quickly and how well all the climbers on the cliff that day came together and evacuated one of our own. In addition to Jon and me, Mike's partners (his brothers Chris and Mark), Art, a local guide with two clients, and six others were present. The litter was promptly retrieved from its cache at the base of Whitney Gilman. Mike was already bandaged up and lifted himself into the litter. He seemed in good spirits despite his situation and was very alert and oriented. We carried him along the base of the cliff to the top of the climber's trail. The rest of the way down was over the talus slope, a large maze of boulders with very dangerous footing and many unstable rocks. We chose not to walk through this but to pass the litter along hand over hand. This means when you hand off the head you need to get to the feet as soon as possible. With only 13 people, this was difficult. By the time two Fish and Game Officers and three Pemi Valley Rescuers arrived on scene, we were in the wooded section below the talus slope and had completed more than three-quarters of the carry out. With their help, we reached the Fish and Game vehicle on the bike path and loaded Mike into the back.

The total time from the accident until we reached the bike path was less than two hours. We made very good time considering the terrain. This was in part to several factors. First, Mike and his partners were incredibly lucky that there were not more injuries. Second, there is a litter available at the base of the Whitney Gilman ridge. And finally, there were enough competent and willing people on the cliff that day.

Although one would hope that every one would volunteer to help a fellow climber, the presence of people with rescue experience was important. My final note is that local rescue teams are a great asset and a very important part of search and rescue but nothing beats a self-evacuation with on-scene resources.

Analysis

I want to make it known that Mike is a very good climber and experienced on Cannon. This is an accident that could happen to anyone, regardless of experience.

Cannon is a very serious place and not a cliff to be under estimated. Mike and his partners were very lucky that much worse did not happen. Rock-fall is very common and a human presence makes it even more likely. When climbing on existing routes, variations or new routes, it is important to be aware of the rock. Always tap blocks to see if they move or sound hollow and avoid ones that do. Be wary of detached flakes and rubble piles.

I know this sounds obvious, but I feel many climbers come from Conway's solid rock and are not as used to this terrain. Don't think because Whitney/Gilman or Moby Grape are popular that they don't have loose rock. Both have signs of recent rock-fall. Everyone knows the Old Man came down recently and Whaleback Crack not too much earlier. It is only a matter of time before the Sickle and the Fickle Finger go too. The talus slope is also active and not a place to be wearing sandals, as one rescuer was. (We did request he not carry and gave him other tasks to perform.) So please, one climber to another, respect [this] cliff and climb safely. (Source: Peet Danen)

(Editor's Note: On Mount Washington, one of New Hampshire's favorite winter climbing arenas, there were six significant accidents. Four of them were the result of glissading with crampons on. One involved a solo ice climber who fell 40 feet and sustained multiple arm fractures. The final one was in Central Gully of Huntington Ravine, where five climbers were practicing skills when an avalanche struck them, resulting in one broken leg. On this particular day, December 30, there were strong indicators of increasing avalanche danger because of fresh snow and high winds. Additionally, they were not equipped with beacons, probes, or shovels.)