

Portland Mountain Rescue)

(Editor's Note: Too many examples of this kind of error, which is why we have included the instructional section on rappelling this year.)

FALL ON ROCK – HIKING TURNS INTO CLIMBING TERRAIN, INEXPERIENCE

Oregon, North Sister

On September 24, Brian C. Jones (37) slipped on the 35-degree friable volcanic rock slope below the summit of North Sister and tumbled down about 1,000 vertical feet to his death.

Jones "...was scrambling on some of the terrain near his climbing partner and he slipped, started sliding, and then cart wheeled down the mountain," according to the report from Lane County Sheriff's volunteer SAR unit.

Analysis

North Sister is a fourth-class route under normal conditions, approached along the top of the south ridge by a faint "climber's way" high up along the west side of a gendarme called The Camel's Hump. The route then winds to the east side of a second gendarme, then traverses across an exposed, friable 35 degree slope called the "Terrible Traverse" just under the Prouty Pinnacles to a gully called "The Bowling Alley" that leads to the summit blocks. Many groups equipped with helmets and rock climbing skills will elect to set a hand line across this traverse and then belay (and rappel) the loose and often ice covered gully to the summit. Other gifted, trained, and experienced individuals have virtually run to the summit talus blocks.

End of summer thunderstorms had coated the steep volcanic scree slopes with snow and ice. Slips under these conditions can lead to uncontrollable falls. (Source: Robert Speik)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT, INADEQUATE CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT

Oregon, Marsupial Crags

On November 14, Aaron Seemen (32) was climbing a 5.7, -mixed multi-pitch climb with a frequent rock climbing partner, Natalie Paden. He was leading pitch-4 of a five5-pitch route called "Birds in a Rut" on The Wombat formation among the Marsupial Crags. He led up off a big belay ledge, placed a cam, and then a stopper. Then he down-climbed back to a stance to take off his gloves that he had been climbing with because it was cold. As he climbed back up, he cleaned the cam. When he climbed past the Black Diamond stopper, it fell out when the direction of pull from the rope changed. He slipped and without an upper anchor, the belay was not functioning, so he fell 25 feet.

Not realizing how seriously he was injured, he painfully rappelled 20 feet to the larger ledge below. At this point, it was clear to them that they could not self-rescue. The climbers had left their cell phones and day packs with their rope bags at the foot of the climb, 200 feet below.

Luck alone enabled them to signal two fully equipped climbers who

happened to be walking on the Burma Road over 1,200 feet below them. The two climbers, by luck again, a Paramedic and a Wilderness First Responder, called 911 from one of their own cell phones and then climbed up to the ledge, bringing gear, clothing, and shelter from the very cold winds during that long afternoon. It should be noted that Aaron and Natalie are also trained WFRs.

Several groups responded. He recalled that six men rigged the high angle anchors and lowered the rescue litter and that six to eight people assisted in carrying the belayed rescue litter down the long 45-degree scree slope. Reportedly, nineteen SAR volunteers were involved, and everything went well during a safe evacuation.

Analysis

Aaron rates himself as having a moderate level of experience and is able to lead climbs rated to 5.9. He noted that he should have placed protection at or above his stance when the stopper below him was dislodged by the climbing rope.

All of their extra clothing and other essential gear, including two cell phones, were on the scree slope below the rock climb. Had they been unable to get help from chance passers-by, Natalie would have had to rappel to the scree, and Aaron surely would have suffered the onset of hypothermia on that very cold and windy day. (Source: Robert Speik – based on interviews with the participants, witnesses, personal climbing knowledge of the venue, and on the Mission Report released by the Deschutes County Sheriff's Search and Rescue Unit)

FALL ON ROCK, NUT/CAM PULLED OUT, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

Tennessee, Sunset Rock, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park

The park received a report of a serious fall and injury to a male climber (23) beneath Sunset Rock in the park's Lookout Mountain area on the evening of July 27th. A pair of climbers started Friday the 13th (5.8+). This was their fifth and hardest route of the day, according to the partner. The climb itself is short and protects well with wires and cams. There's nothing tricky about the gear to an experienced climber, but the crux is strenuous—especially for climbers attempting an on-sight lead at their technical limit—and occurs at a bulge about 25 feet up. This is where the leader encountered difficulties. According to the partner, the leader had placed four pieces of protection when he started to “shake” and lose composure. He attempted to down-climb, but fell in the process, ripping his two highest pieces (a Trango cam and a medium sized BD stopper), and hit the ground. Both of these pieces were seen still attached to the rope lying on the ground.

Responding park and local rescuers treated his injuries and began a carryout