

Laurel Knob Rescue Report

I was called by representatives of Lonesome Valley Inc at 7.30am December 29 to see if it would be possible to assist Cashiers Valley Rescue Squad in the rescue of two climbers that had at this point spent the night on Laurel Knob. When I received the call I was on my way to meet one of our new guides Karsten Delap who would be helping out with two clients for a day at Looking Glass. Luckily the clients understood the need for me to take part in the rescue so we cancelled the day. We arrived at LK through Lonesome Valley at 8.20am where there were 15+ rescuers and 7 or so ambulances/rescue vehicles, etc. already on the scene and had been since around 12 midnight when they had first received the call from one of the climbers. In the night the rescue squad had attempted to find a way to rappel down from the top but had been unsuccessful in locating access or a rappel point.

The climbers were a male and female from Alabama. The female was I would guess in her mid 20's and male late 40's. They had left their car in Panthertown Valley at 3am on December 28th to hike into Laurel Knob and climb 'Groover' 5.8/III. I don't know much about how their day went apart from a few quick chats with the girl but it sounds like they got into the base early and climbed Groover, topping out possibly around 3pm to rapp 'Forbidden Fruit'. After a number of rappels the male rappelled down to near the ends of his ropes but still about 130+ft from the ground and was unable to find the next rappel station (time now around 4.30pm, still light). The male climber was on a steep section and tried to ascend his ropes to less vertical terrain above to try and find the rappel station.

What happened next is a bit of a mystery but it seems that after ascending his rappel ropes for about 20ft he gave up trying to ascend further, possibly out of exhaustion. He is now about 140ft from the ground in a running water groove on vertical terrain, his partner is still at the last rappel station roughly 160ft above in a running water groove alcove. This is how they spent the night, the overnight low was around 25°. The girl called 911 at around 12 midnight from her cell phone, asked later why she did not call sooner she replied that they were worried about losing access of Laurel Knob for climbers because of causing an incident.

We parked near the base around 8.30am and hiked into the base of Laurel Knob. With great embarrassment I must say that this is the first time I have climbed at Laurel Knob! As they say, if you want to quite your personal climbing, start guiding! With the routes being quite wet we opted for climbing Groover to rapp down above them to assist. We climbed Groover to the Grover Variation for a pitch and built an anchor in a water groove where I rapp down to see if I could locate them below. I located the climbers below so we rapp into Forbidden Fruit and left this anchor (booty for anyone climbing Grover Variation this week!) On reaching the girl she was alert and orientated and gave me a big hug as soon as I reached the alcove! She was connected to the anchor poorly so I created a single master point anchor and clipped her directly into that. She was clipped in with a daisy chain and sling, but into one locking biner into one of the non locking biners on the belay station. The way the biner was loaded it is amazing it had not back clipped in the night. After clipping her into my system I unsnapped her rig by 'back clipping' it showing her quickly as I did it but I think the point was a bit lost on her! At this point Karsten arrived at the belay.

Their rappel was rigged with ropes through two non locking biners on two bolts, the ropes tied with a Double Fisherman's Knot. At this point our information from the girl was that he had rapp both ropes as normal and was still, obviously on both ropes. I rigged our ropes as two fixed lines and I rapp down one to the male on a GriGri. As I reached him I spotted the rapp station (SS rapp rings) that he would have been looking for roughly 40+ft to his left. Upon reaching him he was barely responsive, hanging on a 'ropeman' on a daisy chain on ONE of the rapp lines with a fiction hitch above round both ropes that he must have been using as a foot loop attachment point when he tried to ascend the night before. The Double Fisherman's Knot was caught in the non locking biner at the rapp station and that is what was holding him. After seeing this I clipped him into my spare fixed line to make him safe. I pendulumed across to the rapp station to the left, built an anchor and fixed the end of my rapp line to this anchor. I swung back to the victim and transferred him across to me into a 'Tandem Rapp' configuration (single device) with improvised chest harness. This was pretty difficult/interesting/great practice as he was unable to assist and we are in vertical terrain and had to do the load transfers from a fabricated (redundant friction hitch) master point. I pendulumed across with the victim to the rapp station with a friction hitch on the tag line (end of my rapp line) which I had previously fixed to the anchor. From this anchor I tandem rapp to the ground with the victim, directly into the waiting rescue litter around 11am. Karsten tandem rapped the two rapp with the girl to the ground around 11.20am.

Both climbers were very dehydrated, and needless to say cold. The male climber was given an IV, packaged in the litter and evacuated from the scene by the rescue squad immediately. The girl walked some part of the trail but I believe was littered by the rescue squad the rest of the way.

Notes:

The rappeler could have reached the rapp station to the left if he had seen it. It was quite visible, I spotted it while rappelling to him even though I wasn't really focused on looking for rapp stations. From here they could have rapp to the ground.

The male climber had plenty of gear on him to build an anchor to rapp from, he was a couple of feet to the right of a large diagonal horizontal that he could have built and anchor and then they could have both rapp from there. If he did not have the correct gear the

girl could have slid the rest of the rack to him as it was a straight shot down the rope to him from her. If he had done this they would have lost \$100 in gear but gone home by 5pm, not spent the night on the rock and saved the local taxpayer thousands of dollars in a rescue.

Both climbers were prepared for cold weather with good clothing, both had working headlamps on their helmets and were climbing self contained with small bullet packs. They had a large selection of gear (good selection of cams and other pro, rapp devices, ascending devices, GriGri, slings, Cordalettes, etc.)

The girl stated that the male climber was the more experienced one and they had “practiced rescue stuff” the night before.

Even though the male climber had more than enough gear to ascend the rope he was not able to do this. He was rappelling on a Petzl Reverso that can be instantaneously ‘flipped’ to ascension mode (this can be done with the BD ATC Guide too). With a foot loop friction hitch (which he had) he would be able to ascend the ropes safely in minutes (this is one of the coolest features of these type of devices).

If you have any questions or comments please email me at adam@foxmountainguides.com

Regards,
Adam Fox

Fox Mountain Guides and Climbing School

My partner and I were the climbers that were rescued from Laurel Knob on Thursday, December 29, 2006 by Adam Fox and his partner. We want to set the record straight to the events that lead up to our rescue and how our hubris coupled with poor decisions got us in trouble and left my partner and me fighting for our lives. She and I both took part in writing this, though the following account is in first person.

We had been planning during the Christmas break to climb Laurel Knob for some time, we had gathered as much information about the approach, Groover (our choice of route) , and the descent. There was a weather window for two to three days after Christmas that would be sunny with mild daytime temperatures but subfreezing at night. We drove up to Cashiers on Tuesday night and stayed a local inn since it was late, cold and snowing. The plan was to hike the approach on Wednesday scope out the route and the descent. I knew we would not be rappelling the climbing route but a different route and that the last set of anchors were off left from the main descent route. As we were leaving another couple appeared and I could tell by where they were headed they had the same idea as we had to jump on Groover the next morning. When we got back to the trailhead I noticed their truck parked next to the Panthertown put in and we got the competitive bite to get the jump the next morning, that was the first of many poor decisions.

We had decided to stay at the inn that night since the folks there were extremely accommodating and when we got in started sorting the rack for a light-n-fast approach early the next morning. Many decisions that night were made that were based on our ego which was in hindsight nearly cost us our lives. My partner and I talked about self rescue and we decided to take an ascension device and prussic knots to climb the rope. We also carried several leaver biners if a one bolt rappel needed to be done. Then I made probably the worst decision of my climbing career and that was to wear some tough duct pants due to the abrasive quality of quartzite on synthetics. I took another dig into my grave.

We arrived at the Panthertown trailhead at 4:30 AM Thursday morning and noticed that our competition, was just waking and decided we had to haul ass in case we wanted to be the first on the route. So we motored down the trail but I took a wrong turn that allowed the other couple to get ahead of us. My partner and I both got very angry at them for beating us to the punch, our anger clouded our judgement for the rest of the day and we took another dig into our grave. By the time we got to the start of Groover they were racking up and this got me even madder I was really letting things get out of control but my partner wanted to lead the first pitch of Fathom, so as consolation prize I said yeah lets do that and maybe by that time they will be by a couple of pitches up and we can jump on Groover. So we did just that.

We broke the first pitch of Fathom into two, I guess, the first pitch my partner lead up the crack to a ledge where she set a belay and I lead up to a bolt under the roof where we decided to bail and return to Groover. The other couple was on the second pitch thus freeing up the first pitch to the tree. My partner wanted the first pitch which she lead with aplomb over what we agreed, and still do, a classic moderate and her best lead to date. On our approach the bladder in my backpack had leaked leaving us shy of liquids so when I arrived at the tree we got the very last sip. We talked about rapping off right then because it was around one in the afternoon but the rest of the route looked straight forward enough that we both made the decision to continue on, figuring we could be off by dark. The next two pitches went without a problem until my partner following on pitch three pulled up a bite of trailing rope and it broke her front tooth off. She immediately panicked and I calmed her down by telling her we had to finish the route that we could take care of it when we got down. She calmed down and we continued to the rappel anchors atop pitch seven of Forbidden Fruit. By this time the sun had set and we were climbing by headlamps. At this point we decided to rappel. Here is where our decisions all started to break down. First, the groove that FF climbs was running with cold water and when I tossed the ropes down the groove they became soaked with cold water, even though the ropes are double dry. But I was able to find the next set of anchors. On the next rappel the ropes were much heavier and when I tossed they became tangled at a flat point in the groove. When I rappled to the tangle mess the problem with the

duct pants became apparent. The water in the groove was splashing onto the pants and while dealing with the tangled mess my partner and I became soaked and that's when we started to shiver. Let me back up and say that I made one decision that kept us from dying I had carried my cell phone which fortunately I had given to my partner at the top of the first rappel and told her to use it in case something went wrong, that one exchange was to be the event that saved us. By the time we were at the next to last rappel we both were wet cold and shivering, our decision process was breaking down, we both wanted to get off as quick as possible, rational thinking had already succumbed to the onset of hypothermia. When I arrived at the rappel point I saw that one bolt was ok while the other had spinning hanger this was not something that I wanted to see so I placed to leaver biners on the bolts and started to feed the rope through the anchors. Another note that initiated the hypothermia was pulling the ropes from the last rappel was extremely hard through the water. She and I both had to pull the rope with full force in order to drop it down to our rappel station which left us both soaking in water and after the sun had set the temperatures had dropped to around freezing. By the time we had dropped the ropes on the second to last rappel we both were hypothermic with no way to stand out of the spray. My partner was shivering and very cold, I got in a rush to get into the rappel thinking that we only had one more to go that I clipped my rappel device in backwards, that is, the climber hand symbols were just the opposite to the way they should have been. My partner had set an anchor that was inadequate and she knew that she could not put her full body weight it in fear of shocking any part of the system. At this point she was very hypothermic and too confused and disoriented to reset the anchor in order to make it reliable. This left her standing with both feet in cold running water while trying to keep her balance. Our minds were shutting down because we usually check each other's gear but not this time. The next event was the undoing of the whole decision chain that had lead us to this point but it had a fortunate payoff that allowed us not to make that final dig into our grave. As I was rappelling I noticed a small ledge in the middle of the route over some steepening ground. I had tied knots in to each rope in order to not rappel off the end of the rope but on that ledge I decided to pull up the rope and tie the ropes together. That's when I noticed that my rappel device was backwards. It still works, I said to myself, but I was galvanized by how wrong it seemed and how I had made such a terrible mistake. From this ledge I tried to estimate how far we were above the ground but my depth perception was poor and by my judgment we were still had two more rappels. The wall steepened at this point and I rappelled to the end of the rope over a bulge onto a blank face and more importantly out of earshot to my partner. Also to note I was under a constant spray of cold water.

Our last rappel point was in a little alcove where my partner was being continually soaked by the water. As I dangled in space a few feet from the wall I tried to think rationally, I could make it into the wall but there wasn't anyplace to set pro out of direct spray so I placed my ascender and a prussic made from my cordelette. Meanwhile my partner was yelling at me trying to find out what was going on but the bulge kept us from communicating. She did not know if I was on rappel or off and was unable to pull up a bite of rope to rappel down to me. Unfortunately she did not have the skill or experience to be able to descend a weighted rope and was left standing in a constant stream of cold water, unable to get down to me. I managed after an indeterminate amount of time to ascend over the bulge on to the face where we could talk. She asked if we should call for help and I immediately said yes. She stayed in contact with the rescue team throughout the night and into the morning.

By this time my headlamp revealed the state of my hands, which were ghostly pale and translucent. I wanted very badly to just go to sleep and figured that this was the end. My partner's feet had become completely numb and she struggled to keep her balance at the rappel station. My partner would shout down to get my ass in gear and get back up to her. She, too, was fighting the urge to sleep and never wake up. For the rest of the night this is how it went, whenever I would stop climbing my partner would shout and I would wake up and growl, mad at myself for succumbing to urge to sleep. Whenever she began to slip away she, too, would growl, fighting the urge to sleep. We shouted back and forth to each other throughout the night depending on the sound of each other's voice to keep us alive. The rescue squad arrived sometime around eleven that evening and started to try to find a way to get to us. Seems their first plan was to come in from above but they couldn't find which groove we were on such a massive piece of stone. This I surmised in my hypothermic state, but the obvious observation that we should have done was to ask them where the rappel anchors were but that took higher rational thinking which by now I was nowhere near. My goal was to get back to my partner, so I would push the ascender up and climb it was the only thing I could do. Her goal was to get down to me, but again she did not have the experience of descending a weighted rope. My partner would call out when I wasn't moving and I would respond with a growl. Shivering to the point of convulsing would cause us to wake up and growl or our shouts to one another kept us from going to sleep and succumbing to hypothermic death.

When the sun came up the wind began to blow and I could feel the shivering intensify.

Even the sun couldn't warm me. But I kept pushing my ascender up trying to reach my partner who I figured by now was in as bad of shape as I. She had worn synthetic pants which allowed the sun to warm her after becoming very hypothermic and delusional throughout the night. We kept each other awake and alive.

I'm not sure what time it was but Adam Fox arrived at the base of the route just below me and shouted that he would be there in about an hour. Time was something that seemed to be like molasses I couldn't tell one minute from an hour it was surreal. I would drift in and out think that I was on easy ground that I could climb back up to my partner only to wake and realize that was on steep ground and could move at all or I was back at the inn in bed only to wake and growl at my weakness. My fingers were skinned raw from pushing the ascender and prussic up the rope scrapping against the abrasive stone, but I couldn't feel them, guess that's the saving grace of frostbite since you can't feel any pain. I remember looking up to my partner I could see her face and how frightened and worried she looked. Her feet had become frozen and numb after having stood in running water for twelve hours. Then I saw a figure above me, when he got to me he said with a British accent, "Hi I'm Adam Fox", and stuck out his right hand which I remembered I shook but I don't know if I responded very much afterwards. Adam Fox clipped me into his harness, took me off my rope and we rappelled to the base. His partner clipped my partner into his harness and they rappelled behind us. I was immediately placed on a skid and hauled out to the road that runs beside the knob, placed into an ambulance under a warm blanket and an IV was started. I remember asking where my partner was and the EMS guy said she was walking out, I thought that's my lady, a total badass. Her goal

was to get to me but she was too weak to stand and walk the entire distance. I also remember hearing her respond to a question whether to give our names to the press and she said, "No F'N way!"

She was also placed on a skid after passing out and brought to the waiting ambulance. We were very concerned about each other. When we arrived at the Highlands Hospital there were no thermometers available to could check how low my temperature was, when they final found one my core temp was ninety degrees and I had been under a warming blanket for many minutes before taking the reading. I estimate that my core temperature on the wall was probably below ninety. My partner's temperature core was in the low nineties we both had suffered severe hypothermia. I also suffered frostbite on all the fingers of my right hand. My partner had gotten so dehydrated that later when she tried to drink at the base she could not keep down any fluids and could not stand without losing consciousness. She was in shock. She continued to suffer from dehydration throughout the day and into the night, unable to keep food and fluids down. She received IV fluids at the hospital.

Now we must do the things that need to be done: First we want to thank Mr. Fox and his partner for putting their lives on the line to save us. We owe them our lives and a debt of gratitude that I'm not sure we could ever repay. We also want to thank the members of the Jackson County Rescue squad for putting their lives at risk to help get us off the wall. They gained access to us by cutting a path through the adjoining property to Laurel Knob which got us to the hospital very quickly. We would also like to thank the doctors and nurses at the Highlands Hospital who provided astounding medical care and support to bring our physical bodies back to a stable point. We would like to thank the owners of the inn who allowed us to stay an extra two nights while we were being rescued and recovering (and their daughters for baking us cookies). And we want to apologize to the CCC with the most sincere humbleness that we can muster. Your organization worked so tirelessly raising funds to allow us the privilege to climb on the most impeccable stone face in the southeast and if our rescue has caused the CCC to have any access issues we will do whatever it takes to make it right. We know we screwed up. My partner and I kept thinking that if we had done this or that, if I had checked with the rescue people where the anchors were if I had worn the synthetic pants that were in my bag back at the inn, if we had made a thousand different decisions things would have turned out differently. We are willing to pay any price to make things right, that is, any access issues, any liability issues, pay Mr. Fox for his time, anything whatsoever. My partner said that the hand of death brushed across the mountain and came away empty handed, amen, we owe so much to all of you and to each other for fighting for our lives.

Most thankfully,
Lynn and Julie