

## **STRANDED** | Inexperience, Darkness *Linville Gorge Wilderness, The Amphitheater*

On September 17, four climbers set off to attempt the Prow (5.4), a classic three- or four-pitch route in the Amphitheater. All four had significant gym climbing experience. However, this would be their first time climbing outdoors on a multi-pitch trad route. The four divided into two teams, with the first starting up the route at approximately 8:30 a.m. They carried limited rock protection and insufficient clothing and water (all of their water was gone by 1 p.m.).

Both parties completed the first pitch without too much difficulty, although moving slowly. The second pitch presented some route-finding challenges for Pair 2, causing them to downclimb to the start of the pitch and start over. Both parties met at the top of the second pitch late in the day. By now it was getting dark, and the group had only two headlamps among the four climbers.

Pair 1 was able to complete the exposed finish of the climb with no difficulty, and they left a rope along the route to guide Pair 2 to the top. However, this rope was not secured and when Pair 2 pulled on it, the rope dropped and no longer showed the way. In darkness, Pair 2 attempted to continue but could not find the correct route. One of the climbers was cold and exhausted and refused to continue.

Pair 1 waited on top until well after dark before calling 911, in hopes that Pair 2 would be able to finish. Due to the distance and wind, Pair 1 lost voice contact with Pair 2, and they did not feel comfortable downclimbing to Pair 2's location. Pair 2 stayed on the large ledge at the top of pitch two and waited for rescue.

Rescuers arrived sometime after 11 p.m. Once voice contact and a visual on Pair 2's headlamp was established, a single rescuer rappelled directly to them. Pair 2 had an anchor with three well-placed cams and was secured behind boulders in an effort to get some relief from the wind. Clothing, water, and food were provided. Both individuals were uninjured but tired and frustrated with each other.

Rescuers atop the cliff set up a 3:1 haul system to assist the two climbers up the final pitch. The climbers were raised individually, taking approximately 30 minutes apiece. Assisted by rescuers, all the climbers then walked back to their vehicle. (*Source: James Robinson.*)

### **ANALYSIS**

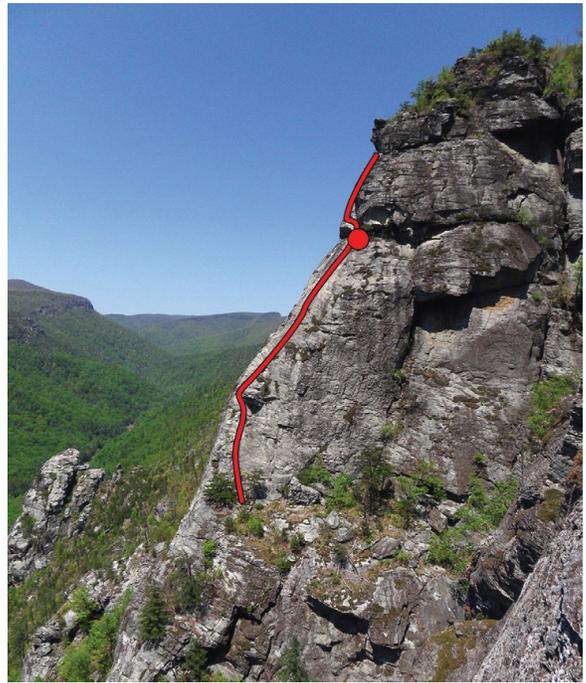
The 5.4 rating may have enticed these climbers to this route. Although the climb may be technically easy, the challenges of a tricky approach, route-finding, rope management, and traditional protection would make this a big step for climbers who are exclusively gym-trained. Finding an experienced mentor and/or building experience on shorter routes are more appropriate ways to venture onto new types of terrain. This incident is also a good reminder to carry adequate food, water, clothing, and headlamps for longer routes, even if you expect them to go quickly. (*Source: Aram Attarian.*)

**Approximate line of the Prow, showing the location of the stranded climbers at the end of the second pitch of the climb.**  
**Mark Cushman**

**STRANDED IN MID-AIR** | Off-Route Rappel  
*Smith Rock, Monkey Face*

On June 22, Cordero Chavez (29) and Tyler Coleman (age unknown) climbed the Monkey Face spire via the Pioneer Route (5.7 C0). Upon completion of the climb, the pair failed to identify the correct descent route. With their two ropes tied together, Coleman rappelled off the west side. (The standard rappel route is to the south.) Coleman reached the end of his ropes while free-hanging in space. (The rope ends were knotted.) Using the equipment on his harness, he was able to transfer his weight to a friction hitch around the rope, but even though he made several attempts to ascend the ropes, he was unable to make any real progress. Chavez dialed 911 from the summit when he was unable to communicate with his partner and the rope remained under tension for too long.

Rescuers responded and climbed the Pioneer Route to the summit. They hauled up 600-foot ropes to the top and performed a “pick-off” of the stranded climber on rappel, with a belay from above for backup. A rescuer and Coleman continued down the long ropes on the west face to reach the ground, while Chavez and the remaining rescuers descended the standard rappel route.



**ANALYSIS**

The guidebook and Internet are very clear on the proper descent route from the Monkey Face. These climbers actually climbed past both sets of descent anchors during their ascent. It’s essential to carry and know how to use basic rope ascending gear when you venture onto climbs with increased commitment levels. (Source: Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office Search and Rescue.)

## **FALL ON ROCK | Exceeding Abilities, No Helmet**

*California, Joshua Tree National Park, Hemingway Buttress, White Lightning*

On January 1, Kenya Pimentel (20) of Las Vegas, Nevada, fell while climbing White Lightning (5.7) at the Hemingway Buttress. Unable to place protection or climb through a crux section, she decided to downclimb and lower off from about 100 feet up the climb. However, while downclimbing she fell, swinging and then hitting her hip on the rock and flipping backward.

The fall distance was about six feet. She was not wearing a helmet and initially complained of both head and hip injuries. Another climber ascended to her position and suspected possible spinal cord injury. She was stabilized into a seated position but unable to be lowered.

Climbers at the crag notified the Joshua Tree National Park staff, who called for a rescue due to the nature of her injuries. Rangers, volunteers from the JOSAR team, sheriff's officers, and helicopters responded. JOSAR team members helped Pimentel's climbing partner escape the belay and then used a high-angle rescue system to extract Pimentel and safely lower her to the ground. All precautions were taken to stabilize her during the evacuation. She was airlifted to Desert Regional Hospital. Fortunately, upon examination, it was determined she had sustained no serious injury. The rescue took about five hours to complete. (*Sources: Jennie Kish Albrinck, Joshua Tree National Park staff, and David Doucette.*)

## **ANALYSIS**

Climbers should always consider wearing a helmet, even when single-pitch climbing, due to the possibility of dropped objects and swinging falls, flipping upside-down, or impacting ledges and other terrain features. Much of the terrain in Joshua Tree is less than vertical, which increases the potential for head injuries in falls like this.

Additionally, the victim's partner did not know how to escape the belay. They were lucky to be in an area with other climbers who could provide assistance and call for help. Had they been on their own, the rescue could have been delayed significantly due to their lack of mobility. (*Source: The Editors.*)

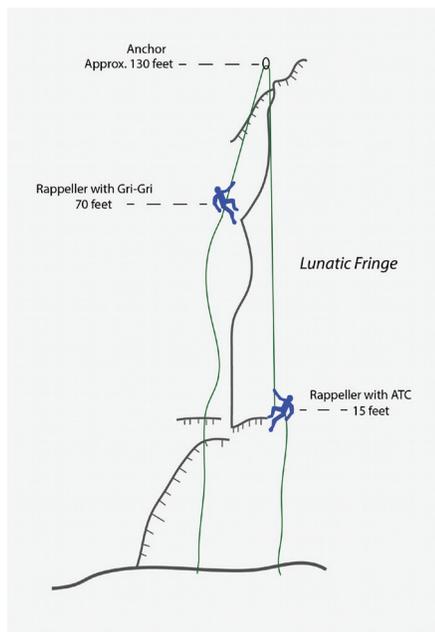
## **SIMUL-RAPPEL FAILURE | No Backups** *Yosemite Valley, Reed's Pinnacle*

On July 10, at 2:50 p.m., Yosemite Dispatch received a call regarding a climber fall with injuries at Reed's Pinnacle. The initial reports came in as a male climber with a broken leg. Upon arrival at the parking area, the first responding ranger found an adult male, John, 33, with an angulated lower leg/ankle fracture. John told the ranger that his partner David, age 41, was still at the base of the cliff and had been in and out of consciousness after a long fall.

The park ranger ran up the approach trail to the base of the cliff with a medic bag. Upon reaching the cliff, he found David unresponsive, without a pulse, and not breathing. He immediately called for additional resources and began CPR. After updates and communication with the park's Medical Control, the patient was pronounced dead at approximately 3:55 p.m.

Numerous interviews with the surviving climber and post-accident analysis by the responding ranger revealed some details of what had happened. Before the accident, the two climbers had climbed Lunatic Fringe, a popular 5.10c single-pitch route. After leading, John remained at the anchor at the top of the climb to belay David up. The two climbers then decided to simul-rappel, with each climber rappelling one strand of the rappel rope, so that each climber would counterweight the other. David used a Petzl Grigri, while John used a Black Diamond ATC device. They were using an 80-meter rope, both ends of which reached the ground from this anchor, but without any extra.

During the rappel, John was beneath David and remembers David stopping or slowing down at some point. John reached a small, sloping ledge about 15 feet above the ground and waited for David to catch up with him. According to the post-accident analysis, David was roughly 70 feet off the ground at this point. John felt a sudden change in the pull of the rope and the rope "going," and he started to fall. He briefly lost consciousness, and when he came to he saw David on the ground near him. John asked David if he was OK and remembered David briefly responding. John told David that he would go get help. When he tried to stand, he realized his leg was broken, and so he crawled down the short approach. At the Reed's parking area, he found visitors who were able to call 911, activating Yosemite's emergency response.



**Relative positions of the two climbers in a Reed's Pinnacle simul-climbing accident. NPS Diagram**

## ANALYSIS

From a follow-up investigation, it is believed David fell approximately 70 feet after the end of the rope on John's side passed through John's ATC rappel device. This was determined based on the amount of rope left beneath David's Grigri as well as other observations. There were no knots or backup systems on the rope.

A fixed nut was observed in the crack near the point where David fell, and one possible explanation is that David paused to attempt to remove this piece of equipment. If David had pulled onto a stance momentarily, unweighting his side of the rope, John would have felt himself suddenly drop (as he stated consistently). It's possible this caused John to lose control of his side of the rappel rope. Without a hands-free backup hitch (e.g., autoblock), he would not have been able to regain control of the rope as it rapidly passed through his belay device, causing both men to fall to the ground.

Simul-rappelling is an advanced technique that is rarely required by the average climber. While simul-rappelling, both climber's lives are placed at risk by any mistakes. *[Editor's note: Two climbers were seriously injured in another simul-rappelling accident, in the Shawangunks in New York, in 2016.]*

John stated that one reason they decided to simul-rappel was that David had a Grigri, which can only be used to rappel a single strand of rope. To avoid the risk incurred by simul-rappelling, John and David could have tied the rope to the anchor, allowing David to rappel the fixed rope on his Grigri. John then could have untied the fixed rope and rappelled with his ATC as usual. (Controlling a rappel with an ATC is patently safer with two strands of rope as opposed to one.) Moreover, David reportedly had climbed the route before and knew the climbers could rappel the route with a single 80-meter rope. Knowing this, David could have lowered John to the ground after he led the pitch, and then John could have belayed David on a top-rope as he seconded the route.

In the special circumstances that simul-rappelling is preferred, good communication is essential. The excessive distance (about 50 feet) between the two climbers perhaps inhibited David from expressing to John that he planned to slow or stop his rappel. If John had been nearer to David, he may have had the opportunity to anticipate the momentary weight shift and not lose control of his device.

One or more backup systems could have prevented this accident. Stopper knots in the ends of the rope would have prevented the rope from passing through John's rappel device. A "hands-free" backup, such as a friction hitch, also might have prevented the catastrophic loss of control. Finally, the two climbers could have linked themselves with a tether, in effect closing the system until they both reached the ground.

*(Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)*

