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Rock ready Summer climbing expeditions require careful planning, training

By Mollie Miller
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Since the early 1960s when rock climbing began gaining popularity among America's baby boomers, millions have challenged gravity as they pulled, pushed and jumped their way up, down and across the nation's cliffs, crevasses and ice flows.

While climbing does offer its own unique highs for those who accept the challenge, the activity's rewards don't come without a price.

"Rock climbing...is not a 'sport' to be taken lightly," David Lane, technical director for the Professional Climbing Guides Institute, said. "There are lots of seemingly small mistakes that can have fatal consequences."

Every year, rock climbers around the nation fall victim to any number of "small" mistakes during climbs that range in difficulty from easy to extremely hard.

Last year, two Soldiers were killed in rock climbing accidents, according to Mike Wood, safety specialist with the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center.

This summer, before climbers set even one anchor, Wood is urging them to think seriously about the dangerousness of the activity they are about to participate in and prepare adequately for all hazards associated with trying to defy gravity.

"You always have to consider if you are experienced enough for the challenge and if your health and fitness level are good enough for the terrain," he said.

Lane, who has been rock climbing for 17 years and currently guides for the Yosemite Mountaineering School and Joshua Tree Guides in California, said common mistakes like poor communication, improper use of equipment, improper belay techniques, dangerous terrain and climber over confidence can all lead to a rock climbing disaster.

"Often, a person's ego and what they think they know can be their biggest enemy," he said. "They choose terrain that is too difficult for their ability, climb with un-trustworthy or less experienced partners and misuse equipment."



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Although rock climbing hazards are many, there are ways to mitigate the risks and have an enjoyable day clinging to the side of a mountain.

“What (rock climbers) have on our side is the ability to decide how we will manage the hazards, where we will climb, what we will climb, who we will climb with and how we will climb,” Lane said.

One important decision that all climbers must make is who they climb with. Climbing alone or “soloing” is a practice that should be reserved for only the most experienced and accomplished climbers, according to Lane. For those less experienced climbers, Wood recommends climbing with a buddy or a team of buddies.

“You never want to climb alone,” Wood said.

John Dill, search and rescue ranger at Yosemite National Park, reported in an article titled “Staying Alive” that being aware of environmental dangers like heat and storms, watching out for loose rock and understanding that ignorance, casualness and distraction can be a climber’s biggest enemies can make a huge difference in a successful rock climbing experience.

“There is always more to learn,” Dill wrote. “Climbing will always be risky... (but) a reduced accident rate is possible without seriously restricting the sport.”

Before setting out, Wood advises every climber to develop a plan. The plan will get the climber thinking seriously about what they are getting themselves into and will also be a physical document they can leave with someone who will be able to check on them or notify authorities if they don’t return as expected.

“Climbing is not something you just decide to do at the end of a 16 hour work day,” Wood said. “That is not a good plan.”

Wood said every climber should carry an emergency kit containing food, water, first aid kit, bug spray, map of the area, sun screen, cell phone, flash light, pocket knife, matches and extra clothes.

Above all else, Lane reminds climbers to never overestimate their abilities to the point that something terrible happens and they must be rescued.

“The decision to (climb) is one that needs to be considered seriously because there are lots of people who will be affected should an accident occur,” he said. “Families will be impacted and rescuers will be put in harm’s way to extract you. It will be an ugly situation that could have been avoided by climbing with a partner, using the correct climbing equipment and practicing proper safety techniques.”

For more information about rock climbing safety, visit www.nps.gov. For more information about the Army’s Safe Summer Campaign, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.