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Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

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Black Canyon's Beauty Disguises Many Dangers

Nancy Lofholm

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National Monuments. Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Montrose)



Denver Post file photo. Shaun Stanley

'This place is pretty unforgiving if you make a mistake,' says Black Canyon district ranger Bob Cornelius.

Black Canyon's beauty disguises many dangers

Falling boulder nearly hits crews in latest park rescue

By Nancy Lofholm
Denver Post Western Slope Bureau

Visitors to the Black Canyon of Gunnison National Park may view a hike there as just a walk in the park.

But the hundreds of search and rescue personnel who have risked their lives to save lost and injured hikers at Colorado's newest national park know it is anything but.

"This place is pretty unforgiving if you make a mistake," said Black Canyon district ranger Bob Cornelius.

Cornelius was one of three dozen park officials and rescuers who spent Sunday night and early Monday morning helping the most recent hiker and climber to require a major rescue effort at the park, which draws 400,000 visitors annually.

Adam Day, 21, of Westminster, had gone hiking on an easy trail along the canyon's south rim Sunday evening when he and a friend veered off from the other three hikers in their group and attempted to climb down into the canyon from the Rim Rock Nature Trail. Cornelius said the victim and others in his party reportedly had been drinking that afternoon after they arrived at the park.

Cornelius said the two men became frightened just before dusk and attempted to climb back up. Day slipped and fell onto a small ledge 30 to 50 feet below, sustaining serious head injuries. It took rescuers from a half-dozen

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agencies in Gunnison. Crested Butte and Montrose about 45 minutes to get the technical-climbing rescue operation under way and another six hours to lift Day 400 feet to the canyon edge.

As the climbers lifted Day out, a 3-foot diameter boulder came crashing down the steep hillside, narrowly missing them, said Montrose County Undersheriff Dick Deines. "It's super dangerous out there. That's one of our dilemmas."

Other major Black Canyon rescue operations this summer included two missions to aid injured rock climbers and the retrieval of a suicide victim's body. The remainder of seven major rescues have been to help hikers who have fallen or just gotten in over their heads.

Two weeks ago, rescuers spent eight hours leading a group of exhausted hikers out of the bottom of the canyon. Park officials urge hikers to be prepared if they are going to go into the canyon, but Cornelius said the problem with these hikers was that they were over prepared.

The hikers from Texas and California had gone into the canyon loaded down with two large stoves, three tents, heavy pots and pans and an array of canned goods. "They weren't prepared for the strenuousness of the hike. They became exhausted," Cornelius said.

The Park Service is making more efforts to ensure that Black Canyon hikers don't need to be rescued. Rescues cost an average of \$2,000 to \$3,000 per incident — and thousands more if a helicopter is needed. Cornelius said the fact that there haven't been any rescues of lost hikers this year indicates the efforts are paying off. The Park Service has added hiking advice to its Web site. Rangers have installed some new directional signs on two popular trails. Plans are under way for a safety video to let hikers know what they will get into. Rangers are also considering an anonymous questionnaire to find out how many "near misses" there are at the Black Canyon. Cornelius said near misses are potentially dangerous situations that visitors were able to get out of.

National Parks Black Canyon of the Gunnison

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