



National Park Service  
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Grand Teton  
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## Grand Teton National Park News Release

### Rangers Conduct Complex Mountain Rescue for Climbers Injured During Lightning Storm

Grand Teton National Park rangers launched a multi-faceted, complex rescue operation to reach numerous climbers who were injured by lightning during the passage of an active and severe thunderstorm in the Teton Range on Wednesday, July 21. Lightning bolts struck multiple locations on the 13,770-foot Grand Teton at around noon, and 16 climbers received moderate to severe injuries from indirect electrical charges radiating from the lightning. One climber—who was still missing on Wednesday evening—was discovered during an aerial search by helicopter at 10 a.m. on Thursday, July 22. Brandon Oldenkamp, age 21, from Sanborn, Iowa, apparently fell about 2,000 feet to his death when he was impacted by a lightning strike. His body was located off the Northwest Face of the Grand Teton below a feature called the Black Ice Couloir.

Teton Interagency Dispatch Center received an initial cell phone call at 12:25 p.m. on Wednesday from one of the climbing parties, requesting help for injured persons. Rangers immediately began to stage a rescue mission for that climbing party, when another cell phone call was received at 1:30 p.m. by a separate climbing party who had also been hit by lightning. Eventually, a third group made contact to summon help and the rescue mission increased in size, scope and complexity.

Rangers summoned the Teton Interagency contract helicopter and began to fly rescue personnel and equipment to the 11,600-foot Lower Saddle of the Grand Teton from where the rescue operation would be staged. Once the equipment and staff were in place at the Lower Saddle, rangers quickly climbed to various areas on the Grand Teton where the injured people were located. As rangers reached the separate climbing parties, they provided emergency medical care and prepared the injured people for evacuation from the mountain. The 16 different climbers all received lightning-related injuries—burns and varying levels of neurological problems—as they were indirectly affected by an electrical charge from one or more lightning strikes. The rescue mission continued in the midst of rain squalls, thick clouds and additional thunderstorms throughout the afternoon and evening hours of Wednesday.

The rescue operation involved a sequential evacuation of the 16 climbers. Two climbers reached the Lower Saddle on their own, but were flown via helicopter to the Lupine Meadows rescue cache. Seven climbers were able to make their way down from a ledge above the Black Ice Couloir at 13,200 feet with the assistance of professional guides from Exum Mountain Guides. The remaining seven climbers—who were located between 13,300 and 13,600 feet in elevation—were reached by rangers and transported via short-haul to the Lower Saddle where they were treated by an emergency room doctor from St. John's Medical Center, before being placed in a second helicopter to be flown to the Lupine Meadows rescue cache on the valley floor at 6,700-foot elevation. The passage of a late afternoon thunderstorm temporarily delayed the transport of the climbers from the Lower Saddle. As weather conditions improved the aerial evacuation continued until all the injured persons were delivered to the valley floor and waiting ambulances that then transported them to St. John's Medical Center.

Three rangers remained at the Lower Saddle overnight in a rescue hut, to help complete rescue operations at first light on Thursday.

The rescue is one of the largest and more complex missions conducted by Grand Teton National Park staff given the number of injured people, the vertical terrain of the incident and inclement weather conditions.

—NPS—

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