

Incident Report

Date of Incident: June 15, 2025

Date of Report: June 22, 2025 vFinal

Location: Approx 200 yds downstream of the Illusions Canyon exit, Coconino County

Team: 4 Canyoneers, Intermediate to Experienced, 2 WFR, 1 WFA

Summary – Refer to Photo Below

While hiking down the wash after exiting Illusions Canyon one team member was walking on a log. As he stepped off the log to the right, his left foot must have slipped to the left where it got caught in a wedge-shaped pocket that was formed between the log on the right and the ground on the left (see photo below). This caused his left ankle to fracture and left foot to rotate 90 degrees to the right, rendering him unable to bear weight. The team notified SAR, and approximately 6 hours later the subject was evacuated via an AZ DPS helicopter. The other 3 team members hiked out the 'sneak' route unassisted.

Narrative

Our group successfully exited Illusions Canyon around noon, changed out of wetsuits, ate, and prepared to hike out the 'sneak' route. At about 12:25 we started down the wash with the subject at the rear of the group of 4. That section of the exit hike involved bush-whacking and stepping on, over and around rocks, dead wood, roots and miscellaneous debris typical of area.

The subject was following the other 3 down the left side of the wash where a partially rotted log formed a relatively clear path through the brush to an open section. As he was walking on the log through and past moderately thick bushes, he stepped off the log with his right foot and proceeded to turn slightly right towards a clear area of the wash. At that point the subject realized his left was caught in a wedged shaped pocket between the dirt and the left side of the log, which jerked his body to a stop. He yelled to the rest of the group, and upon freeing his foot, he and the hiker in front of him noticed that his left foot was twisted 90 degrees to the right. In other words, his left foot pointed right instead of straight ahead. He immediately sat down on the log to assess the situation, and by that time his left foot had naturally popped back into place.

A quick survey revealed there were no protruding bones, and with assistance from his teammates they verified that he was not able to bear weight on that leg. One team member immediately went back up the wash to a clear area at the exit of Illusions Canyon to initiate an SOS using a Garmin inReach (which never went through) and a 911 text using the iPhone Satellite feature, which was successful. They also made contact with a pre-established 3rd party person who helped with coordination and external communications during the afternoon.

The other 2 team members helped the subject back to the canyon exit which became the group's staging point. The subject's sock and boot were removed, where it was again confirmed that nothing was protruding and there was no external bleeding. His ankle was wrapped with an elastic bandage and kept elevated.

During the approximately 6 hour waiting period the subject was administered a total of 600 mg Ibuprofen and 1300 mg Acetaminophen, drank over 2 liters of water, and ate a few snacks. He did not experience significant discomfort or pain, was alert and engaged, and vitals were stable. Although the injured ankle

exhibited significant swelling and initial signs of bruising, the subject maintained a sense of feeling in his foot and toes, and capillary refill was normal. He never fell so there was no concern about upper body injuries.

The Rescue

[Note: Timing is cited to provide a sense of context only and is not intended to be a definitive timeline of the rescue.]

The initial 911 text was placed about 1240. Satellite service was spotty, but within an hour or so we received confirmation texts both from the 911 service as well as from our 3rd party contact that SAR had been notified and was responding. We felt confident of an eventual rescue but also knew it would likely be several hours.

At approximately 1545 or so we heard, then spotted a helicopter in the area. The helicopter spent roughly 15 minutes flying in and out of view, seemingly everywhere but close to or over our staging area - giving the appearance (or at least leading to concern) that they did not see our group. After about 15 min the helicopter flew away.

It's worth mentioning some of our thoughts & conversations that were happening at that time.

- 'Of course they know where we are, they just did a rescue here 8 days ago.'
- 'There's only one Illusions Canyon, and we're at the exit.'
- 'The subject has on a bright hi-viz orange jacket, they had to see that.'
- 'Let's try to get back in touch with SAR and let them know we saw the helicopter.'
- 'Maybe they saw us, deemed we're safe, but had something more important to deal with first.'
- 'Do you think they didn't see us and assumed we started to hike out?'
- While we had confidence in the communications process and SAR capabilities, it's fair to say at that point we were a bit confused and somewhat anxious to get out. At no time, however, was anyone panicked or worried.

At about 1645 the helicopter returned and again flew around the general area. By that time, we were shining our headlamps, set on the brightest white mode, towards the helicopter. About 10 minutes later, the helicopter approached just down canyon of our staging area in a controlled hover, where one first responder was lowered through a very small clearing amongst the trees. The helicopter then departed.

The first responder was met by a team member, was debriefed, and then attended to the subject. He stabilized the subject's ankle then briefed our group on the rescue plan. With assistance, the subject was able to hop about 100 yards down the wash to an area where the helicopter would lift him and the first responder out.

When the helicopter returned at approximately 1720, the pilot radioed that they needed to refuel before a rescue could be made. The chopper returned at about 1825 at which time the subject and first responder were hoisted up. The helicopter flew to the Sedona airport where the subject was transferred to an ambulance and was taken to the local medical center on a non-emergency basis. The other 3 team members collected their gear and hiked out the sneak route.



Photo

Note the thick brush and debris down canyon. Although not shown, this is typical of the terrain behind the spot where the injury occurred. The log formed a bit of a clear path through the brush, and thus the team took that route. It is likely the subject's left foot slipped off the log into the wedge-shaped pocket just as he stepped right.

Insights & Lessons Learned

(From our collective memories and in no particular order)

Regarding the helicopter rescue, the AZ DPS personnel were attentive, professional and unquestionably highly skilled. We learned a lot from the first responder that was lowered down, some of which is worth repeating:

- The SAR team flew from Tucson (~75 min flight) for the rescue because the local chopper and SAR team were busy on another rescue. Although they had GPS coordinates and plenty of location data, being from Tucson they were not intimately familiar with the Illusions Canyon area. Our assumption that 'they just did a rescue here last week' turned out to be invalid.

- The first responder commented that during the first fly-over they saw the subject's bright orange jacket, and thus were able to see us "almost immediately". Evidence that high-viz clothing helps in a rescue situation.
- The first flyover was an effort to assess the terrain for the best rescue location. The SAR team had to return to the airport to strip the chopper of extra weight and get more fuel before lowering a first responder. This was in part because it was so hot that day that the helicopter's lift was limited, so they had to carefully balance weight, fuel, fly time, and safety margin. The difficult terrain also necessitated that they maintain a larger safety margin than a similar rescue in a more open area. Our assumption that the helicopter would show up, retrieve the subject, and leave in one trip showed a lack of understanding of the many details and factors that go into planning and executing a helicopter rescue.
- By the time SAR returned to lower the first responder, the canyon floor was totally in the shade, making visibility from the bright sky above very difficult. Use of headlamps to signal the helicopter played a significant role in allowing the SAR team to quickly locate our group and get bearings as to where everyone was. It was also interesting to see how the first responder used his flashlight to signal the pilot, even though he was also in radio communications.
- The first responder commented that this rescue took extra planning and was 'on the tricky side' because of the lower density air, tall canyon walls, relatively tall trees, and the subject was at the bottom of the wash. 'It took 3 flights, we have a 300 ft cable, we keep 30' in reserve, and we used about 260' to reach you.'
- During, as well as after the events of the day, we felt confident that our preparation, planning, experience, and training paid off. Our first-aid training was invaluable in both a medical and 'situational' context, including the subject's WFR which help him help himself. Our first aid kit was appropriately stocked, we had food & water, were equipped with inReach & iPhone satellite communication devices, headlamps, and other provisions should we have had to spend the night or move – albeit slowly – down the wash to another location. And we had been in contact with our pre-established contact person who was aware of the situation and played an integral role in rescue coordination and communications.

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