



# HELENA CLIMBERS COALITION

## FALL 2024 NEWSLETTER



### Is it that time already?

Dear friends, crushers, choss wranglers, pebble wrestlers, trad dad's (and mom's), rope guns, and top rope toughies... it feels strange to already be talking about the end of summer (let alone putting out the fall newsletter), but as the saying goes "time flies when you're having fun."

It's been a busy time for the HCC, and we have some exciting plans to improve our already excellent Helena Valley climbing crags. Between a few upcoming work days, a HUGE grant for 2025 from the US Forest Service, and the ongoing efforts of our members, caring for and maintaining our crags continues to be a top priority. Earlier this year we had a smashing success at the Myrna Loy with Reel Rock, and the Tuesday night social climbs continue to be a fun way to bring our community together. Thank you to everyone who has helped make these events a great experience.

Hopefully, you've all had another great adventure-filled season. Whether that was sending your local project, venturing into the Montana alpine, or traveling to some distant land, we would love to hear your story! Near misses and lessons learned are also valuable information. If you're interested in sharing with the HCC Membership in the next newsletter, submit a write-up and photo! [Click here!](#)

## Upcoming Events



### **\*Last Social Climb, Aug 27th @ Sheep Mtn, 5:30pm!**

Original plan was to finish at Avalanche, but due to fire closure we've moved it to Haystack. Boulderers can boulder, rope jockeys can rope jockey!

### **\*Montana Women's Climbing Fest, Sept 6-8th 2024**

Hosted by the Female Climbers Collective, this promises a fun weekend of camping and climbing in Hellgate/Avalanche gulches (assuming no closures). From climbing clinics to morning yoga, the MWCF is a great place to hone your skills. Want to learn more? [Click here!](#)

### **\*Mt. Helena trail work, September 21-22, 9am-5pm!**

We need you, our highly motivated, downright dedicated Helena Choss Wranglers to help rebuild Sunset Slabs! The trail to the crag is in dire condition and needs some much deserved TLC. We've secured permission from the city to improve the approach trail to Sunset Slabs. The city has graciously agreed to mule supplies to the crag for us. If you can spare your weekend, a day, or just a few hours, please sign up so we know how best to utilize your time! [Sign up here!](#)

### **\*Sheep Mtn Workday and BBQ, Oct 26, 9am-5pm!**

The trail up to Irishman, Pandemic, the Ant Hill, and Upper rock has become a bit of a free-for-all. In the interest of practicing good Leave-No-Trace ethics and providing a singular trail to these less-frequented crags, the HCC is organizing a work day to mark out a more obvious trail. We've received permission from the BLM and are working with local climbers who know the area to mark out where the trail will go. If you possess a sharp eye for infrequent cairns and lightly-trodden ground, you may already take the proposed path, but for those of us who don't spend as much time navigating Sheep Mountain, this will help reduce the impact we as climbers strive to minimize. After the workday, join us for a barbecue and some climbing at Haystack (weather permitting)! Please let us know if you intend to join so we can plan accordingly. [Sign up here!](#)



## \*USFS Resource Advisory Committee Grant - 2025

We are beyond stoked to announce major funding for a big infrastructure project at both Hellgate and Avalanche gulches in the summer of 2025. The HCC applied for and received \$17,700 in funding to improve access paths and belay pads at almost all major walls in each drainage. This builds on the 5k in funding the HCC received from the Access Fund in 2022 to start work on the Winter Wall trail and belay infrastructure. The funding was provided through the Helena-Lewis and Clark Resource Advisory Committee convened by the US Forest Service. This was a competitive process and our application was among the top scoring of over 30 project proposals received by the committee.



These funds will pay for two weeks of time from a Montana Conservation Corps crew to assist with the development of these trails and belay pads as well as supplies to do the work. We also are planning to create signage at each area and working with the USFS in helping control noxious weeds found at these sites. As part of this work we will hold work weekends at each gulch in 2025 where members will assist in construction of this infrastructure. Member attendance at these events is **critical** as we can use your donated time to match the funds we were awarded. Stay tuned for details on these events as we move into the planning stage. If you are interested in reading the proposal, access it [here](#).

# **Unexpected Rockfall - By Shane Forsythe**

Rockfall is a constant fact of rock climbing, especially in the Helena area. It is a hazard that we all have to assess and decide for ourselves if the risk is worth the reward of climbing. Typically the risk is pretty minimal, like small pebbles raining down from above. On occasion, however, larger rocks will come down. Oftentimes, these larger rocks can be identified and avoided or safely removed. On rare occasions the rocks aren't identified and get unexpectedly pulled or kicked off the wall. Most of the time the rock falls harmlessly, maybe causing a fall or requiring the belayer to step aside. Many of us have, no doubt, seen videos online of large rockfall or have heard stories of rockfall from other climbers. Often, we don't think we will ever be involved in a rockfall event that will be of any consequence. On Sunday, August 11th, our climbing group was involved in a rockfall incident that sent one of us to the emergency room.

Our group met up on the late Sunday afternoon to get one last session in before the end of the weekend. All five of us have been climbing regularly all summer and decided that we wanted to explore some areas that we don't frequent. This led to the decision to climb on the north east face of the Eastgate Wall at Hellgate Gulch. Our group decided to split up and get a few routes on the wall; Laura, Kelsey, and Katherine decided to head up to the route Great Full Dead (5.10d) while Abi and I, decided to get a quick climb in on the route Bessie (5.10). If you are not familiar with the area, Bessie starts on the road and is a pretty clean route, while Great Full Dead requires a steep hike to a less frequented area.

After Bessie, Abi and I headed up to meet up with the other three. By the time we joined the rest of the group, Kelsey had climbed Great Full Dead and Laura was preparing to lead the route. Not wanting to sit around too much, I decided to climb the neighboring route, Dynamite (5.11c). Abi agreed to belay me. We prepared for the climb by stick clipping the first bolt, performed our buddy checks, and I set off on the route. This route is at my on-sight limit and there was some expectation of a fall, which I took at the third bolt.

At this point I was hanging from the rope sorting out the beta. I reached up and checked an undercling and there was some classic Helena area choss behind the flake but the main flake was solid. I took the time while hanging to clean up some of the small bits of rock and safely tossed them below everyone. I pulled back onto the route, managed to clip one more bolt and fell again. This is the first time that I noticed another possible undercling to my right. I gave it a tap and it sounded solid enough. It looked like a typical flake in Hellgate, so I didn't think much more of it. I had Abi lower me enough to reattempt the sequence, this time including the flake to the right. I pulled up with my left hand, reached over to the right-hand undercling, and pressed up with my legs. Most of my pulling weight was on the right hand. That is when the flake broke from the cliffside and I fell. I had very little warning the flake was going to break and had no time to yell "rock". I watched as the rock chunk fell right toward Abi.



The rock hit Abi in the head.<sup>1</sup>

It was very clear that Abi was not in good shape. Panic and shock settled in, and with her brake hand, she checked the back of her head and found blood. After a few deep breaths, she regained enough control and presence of mind to lower me off the route. On the other route, Laura immediately called for Kelsey to take in the slack and lower her down. I got Abi's helmet off, and used Laura's first aid kit to cover and apply pressure on the wound. Abi was in shock by this point. Katherine and Kelsey started to pack up all the gear since it was clear we needed to get Abi back to



town and professional medical attention. We wrapped Abi's head to hold the compress in place and made our way back to the car. We left our quickdraws on the wall, as it was unlikely anyone would be up to those climbs anytime soon.

Abi was able to get down the steep approach trail and back to the car under her own power, though Kelsey was with her every step of the way. Once at the car, I carefully removed some of the wrapping on her head to add another layer of material to keep soaking up the blood. Abi was starting to come down from the initial shock but she was still very shaken. At this point, I feel like I need to say that Abi never lost consciousness, never felt dizzy, and was cracking jokes after the initial shock of the rockfall wore off. During the ride home, the conversation got a bit more light-hearted (discussion of which bodily fluids should be considered "precious bodily fluids"). I dropped everyone off at Laura's house and got Abi to the emergency room to get some proper medical attention.

Ultimately, Abi got 14 staples in her head to hold the wound closed. Additionally, the doctors gave her a CT scan to check for internal brain damage. Everything came back clear!

There are four takeaways from this incident that I felt need to be shared with the climbing community at large. The first of which is to wear a helmet. Everyone in the group that day was wearing a helmet. After looking over Abi's helmet, it looks like the rock caught her first in the helmet, twisted and struck her in the back of the head, causing the lacerations.

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<sup>1</sup> Photo shows the rock next to my size 9 shoe

The second takeaway is to use an assisted braking belay device. Abi was using a Petzl Neox, a new take on the Grigri. This was important because when the rock hit her, I had already loaded the rope from my fall. Her reaction to the rock hitting her was to reach up and check her head. In doing this, she dropped the brake strand. The belay device continued to hold me and saved me from falling to the ground. I think it was a normal and instinctual reaction for Abi to reach for her head. In an incident like this, it is impossible to say if the belayer will always keep control of the brake strand, so an assisted braking belay device can be that extra layer of security when things go wrong.

The third takeaway is to carry a first-aid kit that has more than just a few bandages. Having the right tools available to stop the bleeding quickly helped keep more of Abi's precious bodily fluids in the right place and helped her calm down. Without the first-aid kit, we would have had to improvise a bandage and possibly make the situation worse.

Finally, no matter how much experience you may have as a climber, accidents can happen to you. I have been climbing for many years, and I still made a mistake that resulted in an injury to my belayer. The mistake was simple; I didn't think the undercling and flake was a risk.

Ultimately, Abi is recovering well. Her staples were removed after six days. She still has a minor headache on occasion and some body aches from not being able to sleep with the back of her head on the pillow.

This accident could have been much worse. If she had not been wearing a helmet, there is no doubt that Abi's injuries would have been much worse. If she had not been using an assisted belay device, I would have taken a 30 foot ground fall and probably a nasty tumble down the steep approach. If we didn't have a first-aid kit, stopping the bleeding would not have been as fast, possibly escalating the situation. This was the most severe injury due to rockfall that I have been witness to or part of during my time climbing. As choss wranglers of Helena, please be prepared when you venture outside to play in the great outdoors. Stay Safe!



## Bad bolts? Sketchy anchors?

Thinking about those bad bolts you clipped the last time you were out? [Report them here](#). Want mussy hooks for your favorite route or want to learn how to replace bolts and anchors? Email Dan at [daniel.bachen@gmail.com](mailto:daniel.bachen@gmail.com)

Like the new hardware and mussy hooks? The American Safe Climbing Association has generously donated much of the hardware now present on several popular routes around the Helena Valley. Consider giving them a [donation](#) if you haven't already.

## ! Please fill out the 2024 Access Fund survey

#Access Fund has just released their 2024 Climber Survey and wants to hear from you! Fill it out to make your voice heard, and you'll be entered to win a Mystery Ranch Scree 32 Backpack and a YETI Tundra 45 cooler. [Take the survey here!](#)



## Need to pay your membership dues???

<https://helenaclimberscoalition.org/members/> Still only \$30, what a great deal!



### **Stonetree Discounts**

Thanks to the generosity of Helena's local gym Stonetree Climbing, Contributing Member perks include:

- **\$13 Tuesday Day Passes**
- **Student pricing on memberships** (\$50/month Discounted EFT)
- **10% off all retail** (chalk, chalk bags, and more climbing related merch )

See [Stonetree's Website](#) for further details.



<https://helenaclimberscoalition.org>