



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow - Poor Snow Conditions, Guide Distraction

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Grand Teton

On June 17, after climbing the Grand Teton and descending in the shade on hard, frozen snow with crampons, we came across an area that had been in the sun for less than an hour. We were 10 meters above a large ledge. We moved over to follow the footsteps we had used during the ascent. As we descended my right footstep collapsed. I attempted to regain my balance but found myself on my right side and sliding for the ledge just above the "Rosenberg Slot." I slid about two or three meters, anticipating sliding in control to the ledge and stopping. As I hit the ledge, my left crampon caught and stopped, but my right foot did not stop at the same time. This resulted in a severe sprain of my left ankle (complete rupture of both peroneus tendons, requiring surgical repair). My climbing client, Mathew, was able to assist me with removing my crampons (we would be out of the snow for the rest of the descent).

I continued to guide Mathew down to the base of the Black Rock Chimney, at which point I called the Exum office and told them I had injured my ankle and would need help getting Mathew down from the Lower Saddle. Jim Springer from the Grand Teton climbing rangers called me on my mobile, and we discussed the options of staying put or continuing to descend until a helicopter was available to assist. Mathew and I continued with a second party that was descending as well. Together we were able to rappel to the bottom of the "Briggs Lab" and then to the area below the "Water Hole." Mathew and I continued down to the Black Dike. Mathew headed to the Lower Saddle to retrieve my ski poles. Just after he arrived, the NPS helicopter arrived with two rangers. They brought a pair of forearm crutches that helped immensely. As we descended, arrangements were made to fly an Exum guide to the Lower Saddle to walk Mathew back to the trailhead and fly me to the valley. Upon landing at Lupine Meadows, I was met by rangers and my partner, who drove me to St. John's Medical Center.

Analysis

Be vigilant when entering into areas of transition between shadow- and sun-affected snow. Be extremely careful when wearing crampons and sliding, even when you feel you are in control.

The distraction of guiding may have caused me to not see the failing snow step that broke out and caused me to slide. I believe I looked back to make sure Mathew was following at the time I lost my balance. This distraction may have contributed to the accident. Traveling in familiar terrain may have contributed to the willingness to multi-task at this point. (Source: Jim Williams, 58.)

Images

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