



AAC Publications

Rockfall

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Garnet Canyon

On August 27, at 9:15 a.m., a large rockslide occurred in the South Fork of Garnet Canyon. A single climber was buried and seriously injured when his party of three was caught in the outwash of a gully near the north side of Nez Perce Peak.

The initial 911 call came into the Teton Interagency Dispatch Center at 9:30 a.m. via cell phone. According to the reporting person, Truett Davis, many people were involved in a major rockslide and some were possibly buried. Helicopter 25HX was requested for rescue operations, and based on the initial report a request was made for an air ambulance (EIRMC) to respond to Lupine Meadows. Additional personnel and Jenny Lake rangers were requested to assist. The command post was established at Lupine Meadows SAR Cache.

During this time two SPOT device activations were received. Both were associated with the rockslide incident. One was accurate; the second was off coordinates by approximately two miles.

According to the other two members of the team of three (Kevin Nowack and Dave Williamson), they were attempting to reach the summit of the Middle Teton during a day climb from their campsite in the Meadows. The three started the day by climbing directly above camp. This choice of route deviated from the normal climbers' trail by ascending loose scree onto steep slopes. From a high point, the three men became aware of the need to traverse back to the South Fork of Garnet Canyon. As they traversed a small rockslide occurred near their location. Then, as they were crossing the base of a large chute, a very large rockfall cut loose from a cliff face high above their location.

Nowack and Williamson were able to cross the chute and find shelter under an overhang. Phil White (54) was unable to cross, so he took shelter beneath a large boulder. The majority of the very large boulders in the rockfall just missed his location, but a large number of smaller rocks and dirt filled in around his location and buried him. Once the rocks stopped moving, Nowack and Williamson came to his aid. They were able to dig him out by hand. They pulled about two or three feet of dirt and rock away until he was uncovered. He was badly injured, so they kept him warm and did not move him until others arrived to help.

Exum Mountain guides Mike Shane and Brenton Reagan went to the scene and assisted with medical care until Jenny Lake rangers arrived. It was confirmed that only a single person needed medical evacuation. Around 11 a.m., helicopter 25HX responded to the area with Rangers Schuster, Armitage, and Fletcher. They provided advance medical treatment for White's fractured extremities and possible internal injuries. He was back-boarded, placed in a litter, and prepared for short-haul to Lupine Meadows.

Analysis

Rockfall in the Teton Range is a common occurrence year-round. Over the past several years, multiple large rockslides have occurred in and around Garnet Canyon. Throughout the summer, the northern couloirs of Nez Perce have seen multiple small rockslides. During the previous days, monsoonal moisture had deposited a large amount of rain in the area. The rockslide was most likely due to below-average seasonal snow and the wet conditions. (Source: Rich Baerwald, Incident

Commander.)

Images

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