



AAC Publications

Fall into Crevasse, Skiing Unroped

Canada, British Columbia, Yoho National Park, Daly Glacier, Wapta Icefields

A party of three was ski touring over a number of days from Peyto Lake to Sherbrooke Lake on the popular Wapta Traverse. The group left Balfour Hut around 11 a.m. on the morning of March 12, and crossed over the Balfour High Col (approximately 3,000 meters) in the early evening, with near whiteout conditions. After starting to descend the Daly Glacier toward the Scott Duncan Hut, five kilometers away, the team members decided to unrope. At approximately 7:30 p.m. one member of the party fell into a crevasse. Another skier went to the edge, on belay with a rope, and yelled into the crevasse but received no response. The skiers received a weak beacon signal originating 35 meters below, inside the crevasse. A rope was lowered 60 meters, but there was no pull on the end. The two skiers on the surface decided there was nothing they could do, given the darkness and weather, so they left their skis to mark the crevasse, walked up to a flat area above the crevasse, and dug a snow cave at around 2,700 meters. They activated the SOS on their SPOT satellite beacon around 11:30 p.m.

From March 13 until March 15, Parks Canada Visitor Safety (VS) rescue crews tried repeatedly to reach the area, but were unable to access the site due to unusually stormy weather and high avalanche danger. On March 15, with the weather marginally better, a VS team was inserted near the crevasse by helicopter. They were able to ski up to the accident site, where they discovered a pair of skis near the SPOT GPS location. The team investigated the area near the skis and found an open hole in the crevasse. One VS rescue member looked into the crevasse but could see no clues. An avalanche beacon search did not reveal any signals, and there was no response to shouts. As the helicopter was preparing to bring in more equipment for an extensive crevasse rescue, the pilot spotted a party of two on the surface a few hundred feet above the VS team.

The VS team's priorities immediately shifted to the two survivors, who were soon escorted to the nearby heli-pad. The survivors were evacuated by helicopter in very bad weather and taken to a hospital, where they were treated for minor cold injuries. The weather and avalanche conditions were very poor for the next four days. During a clearing on March 19, crews were able to access the crevasse site and reach the deceased.

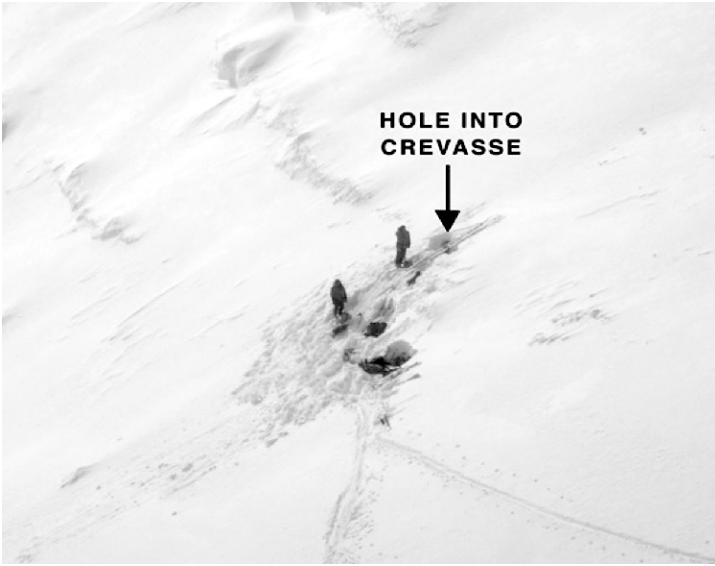
Analysis

This incident occurred on a popular ski-touring route that is often undertaken at this time of year. One causal factor was the party deciding to unrope in near whiteout conditions and fading daylight. It is common for parties to ski downhill unroped on glaciers, but skiers should always weigh this decision in light of changing or unfamiliar conditions, snow depths, visibility, and so on. Another factor was the route the party followed toward the Scott Duncan Hut, which was steeper and more crevassed than the route most parties take.

Given their experience level, darkness, and the stormy conditions, the party thought it would be too dangerous to venture down into the crevasse or to continue to Scott Duncan Hut after the accident. These decisions were the right ones, given these circumstances. Under such conditions, it may be possible to descend into a hole to check on a fallen skier or climber, but actually getting someone out of a tight crevasse is a very difficult and technical process. It typically requires more rescue resources than parties have available to them.

The skiers remaining on the surface were prepared to bivouac for numerous days, having sleeping bags, a stove and fuel, food, extra clothing, and navigation equipment. They also had a SPOT satellite device, which was accurate and enabled them to initiate a rescue. Of note, SPOT devices are essentially one-way communication systems. Although Visitor Safety knew there was a call for help, they did not know the nature of the incident. There are many such devices on the market, and their capabilities are steadily evolving. If you purchase one, be sure to understand the limitations of your particular unit.

Images



Rescuers at the scene of a fatal crevasse fall on the Daly Glacier.

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