



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow, Altitude Sickness – Party Separated

Alaska, Denali, Denali Pass

On June 15, three European climbers from separate teams suffered varying degrees of frostbite, exposure, and minor injuries from falls while descending the upper mountain in poor weather.

At 12:30 a.m., climber Steve House contacted the NPS patrol led by ranger Brandon Latham at high camp and told rangers he had been helping a climber down the Autobahn (the descent from Denali Pass). The climber had taken two fairly substantial falls. After the second fall, which the climber self-arrested, House helped the climber anchor himself to a fixed picket, where he said he wanted to wait for other climbers who were higher on the mountain.

These other climbers eventually reached the injured climber and spent approximately four hours getting him down to a point four to five rope lengths above inconsequential terrain. A U.S. Army expedition helped lower the climber about three rope lengths. When ranger Latham's team arrived on scene, they conducted two more lowers to reach a litter positioned at the bottom of the Autobahn. Latham's team of three, plus six emergency-hired climbers from high camp, pulled the litter across the flats to reach the patient's tent. Two climbers were subsequently evacuated from high camp by NPS helicopter. [Source: Denali National Park Case Incident Record.]

ANALYSIS

Although it's not uncommon for climbers to ascend the upper West Buttress Route alone and/or unroped, these practices obviously are risky. In addition, the climbers that got into trouble this day clearly had overextended themselves—and perhaps underestimated the difficulties of an “easy” route like the West Buttress. Although climbers from Europe and the Lower 48 may have the necessary experience with glaciated mountains, Denali adds the substantial difficulties of higher altitude and extreme cold, for which some climbers are inadequately prepared. [Source: The Editors.]

Images

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