



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Avalanche, Climbing Unroped

Alaska, Denali, West Buttress

While waiting for stable weather to attempt a difficult route on Denali's south side, members of the New Zealand Alpine Team and friends climbed the West Buttress Direct, above Windy Corner, on June 13. The climbers had split into separate rope teams. Near the top of the ridge, the slope angle decreased and the upper team made the decision to continue unroped. One of the climbers had almost reached the top of the ridge, at approximately 16,000 feet, when he attempted to knock a snow mushroom off the side of a rock outcrop. This triggered a small snow slide from above the outcrop, which pulled him off and sent him tumbling approximately 50 meters down the ice slope. He was seen trying to self-arrest, and he eventually came to a stop in a small depression with a broken right leg and other, minor injuries.

The fallen climber and his partners began a self-evacuation by rappels. Eventually they were joined by members of the other team, who helped with the rappelling efforts. The climbers descended more than 2,000 feet to reach the climbers' trail on the West Buttress Route, just above Windy Corner. Two climbers then traveled up to the 14,200-foot camp, and at approximately 7 p.m. they alerted the NPS ranger staff about the accident and requested assistance.

Ranger Brandon Latham and volunteers descended to the scene with medical supplies and a Cascade toboggan. Assessment revealed that the victim had an angulated right leg fracture and other injuries. He was packaged and transported uphill to the 14,200-foot medical tent, where he was stabilized. At 8 a.m. the following day he was evacuated by NPS helicopter to Talkeetna. [Source: Denali National Park Case Incident Record.]

ANALYSIS

Even small-scale avalanches can precipitate a fall, and climbing unroped increases the risk that a minor slip will turn into a major tumble. This climber was very fortunate that his fall did not continue all the way down the West Buttress. The team's efficient descent of more than 2,000 feet of steep, technical terrain with an injured partner was a commendable example of skilled self-rescue. [Source: The Editors.]

Images



[Left] A climber near the top of the West Buttress Direct on Denali, shortly before a small avalanche caused him to fall. [Right] The climber's fractured right leg.

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