



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow

Alaska, Denali, West Buttress

On June 29, Alpine Ascents International (ALP)-9 was descending the fixed ropes after a stay at the 17,200-foot camp. Toward the bottom of the fixed lines, at about 15,400 feet, one of the clients took a short twisting fall and heard a “click” in her right knee. She immediately felt a sharp pain. She was able to continue her descent by sliding in the deep snow and bracing her injured knee with her left leg.

After arriving at the 14,200-foot camp, ALP-9 guides Ben Jones and Peter Moore contacted NPS staff and requested a medical examination for their client. There were no significant findings beyond her knee injury. The guides were instructed to self-treat and allow time to heal.

The following day the climber was unable to bear any weight on the injured knee. The guides felt it was unlikely she would improve in the next several days. They concluded that trying to evacuate the climber under their own power would likely lead to further injury, and they made a formal request for NPS assistance with the evacuation from the 14,200-foot camp to the 11,000-foot camp, at which point they felt they could safely continue the evacuation unassisted. Given the forecasted weather, rangers Mike Shain and Joey McBrayer decided an immediate descent was best.

The patient was rigged in a Cascade litter with four NPS staff attending on skis. The team started their descent at 6:40 p.m. The ALP-9 guides were tasked with facilitating their own descent to the 11,000-foot camp with the patient’s equipment. The NPS team switched from skis to crampons at the top of Squirrel Hill and continued the lower without incident. Due to the deep snow conditions, a belay rope was never necessary. Both teams arrived at the 11,000-foot camp at 10:30 p.m. The ALP-9 team arrived at the 7,200-foot camp the following morning and flew out via their scheduled fixed-wing aircraft. The climber later reported to NPS staff via email that she’d sustained a partial tear of her right anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and required surgery. [Source: Denali National Park Supplemental Case Incident Record.]

ANALYSIS

Each year the Denali rangers and commercial guide services join forces to maintain parallel fixed lines on the headwall above the 14,200-foot camp leading to the crest of the West Buttress. During peak season, large crowds of climbers may develop, moving up and down the fixed lines. Lead Mountaineering Ranger Coley Gentzel has provided the following tips for efficient and safer travel on the fixed lines:

Use the lines only for balance. Climb the snow and ice. Don’t trust the lines and anchors implicitly. Keep your eyes up and evaluate everything around you for safety concerns. Have a plan for communication—being able to stop, start, and communicate when you are clipping and unclipping the ropes around fixed protection is key to moving efficiently on the lines. Climbers in a team should be 10 to 12 meters apart. Too much space between climbers causes difficulties with communication and passing fixed protection. A short lanyard is easiest to manage. You should be able to weight the lanyard attached to your ascender while still reaching the ascender easily. Make sure everything you’re carrying on your body or pack is secure. Dropped items falling down the headwall can be deadly. Reorganize your team at the top and bottom of the lines. Keep moving once you are on the lines.

Images



When moving up or down the fixed lines on Denali's West Buttress, climbers should stay about 10 to 12 meters apart and use the lines only for balance.

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