



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice - Inadequate Protection, Screw Pulled Out

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Louise Falls

On February 27 a party of two was climbing the classic multi-pitch ice route up Louise Falls (WI4/5).

They had climbed the crux pillar and were on the easier last pitch. The less experienced climber attempted to lead this pitch but found it was too much for him, so he lowered back to the belay off a single ice screw. The more experienced leader took over, led past the ice screw, put in another screw, and continued toward the top. As he was climbing over the final bulge, his feet blew out and his tools, which were not set well, popped out of the ice. He fell and pulled out the top screw. The next screw down held his fall. He fell approximately 12 to 15 meters and caught his foot on the ice, breaking his lower right leg. It was 4 p.m. The injured climber was in a lot of pain and the team could not move, so the climbers started yelling for help.

Banff Dispatch got the call from some bystanders on the trail underneath the ice climb. Two Visitor Safety (VS) specialists responded by helicopter from Banff, and two responded by snowmobile from Lake Louise. VS specialists attempted to heli-sling into the patient site, but called off this effort due to overhead tree hazards. The second plan was to sling to the top of the climb with rescue equipment and get ready for a ground evacuation that would last into the night. A single VS specialist was slung to the top of the climb and, with the aid of a guide who happened to be on top, was lowered to the patient's location. The remaining three VS specialists arrived on top with the rest of the rescue gear and belayed the uninjured partner as he climbed up and out. A decision was made to raise the patient to the top of the climb and then lower him down the walk-off route to avoid exposing the rescue team to large hanging ice daggers to the right of the climb. A VS specialist lowered to the site with the stretcher and leg splints and packaged the patient to be raised to the top.

VS specialists were in communication with a doctor at the Banff hospital who advised realignment of the injured limb and nitrous oxide for pain management, both of which were applied to the patient once he reached the top of the climb, with positive results. The patient was then pulled through the forest on a stretcher and lowered to the shore of Lake Louise, which was a long and arduous process for everyone involved.

ANALYSIS

Lead falls while ice climbing often result in serious injuries. The leader should be well within the margins of his or her climbing ability. But accidents happen, which is why it is essential to protect frequently to limit the consequences of a fall. Often, the trickiest part of an ice climb is at the top of a pitch, where you transition from steep to lower angled terrain. It is difficult to see your feet and the ice may be brittle or thin at the top. It is essential to move in control and protect yourself well at the top-out.

Images

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