



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice - Inadequate Protection

Canada, Alberta, Ghost River Valley, Malignant Mushroom

On the morning of March 15, two very experienced climbers set out to attempt a series of climbs in the Ghost River Valley. After starting up the first pitch of Malignant Mushroom (WI5), the lead climber fell while placing his first ice screw. He fell about six meters to the base of the climb and slid a short distance, injuring his back. The belayer pushed the 911 button on both of the climbers' SPOT devices to call for a rescue. He then assessed the climber's injuries, insulated him from the ice, covered the patient with an emergency tarp, and used a stove to fill hot water bottles to place around the patient, helping to prevent hypothermia.

At 9 a.m., Banff Visitor Safety (VS) received the coordinates of the location. The SPOT signals were canceled at one point and then reactivated, which caused a minor delay. After phoning the numbers accompanying the SPOT registration, VS staff were able to confirm that the owners of the SPOT devices were ice climbing in the Ghost River Valley.

At about 11 a.m. the patient was located at the base of the ice climb. Four rescuers slung into the site by helicopter and packaged the injured climber. At 1:45 p.m. the patient was slung out to a staging area and transferred to a STARS Air Ambulance for transport to the hospital in Calgary. His injuries included four fractured vertebrae and a large hematoma on his hip.

ANALYSIS

Despite having all the skills needed for a climb, accidents can happen to anyone. This party was well-prepared. They told friends where they were going, brought appropriate equipment, and had emergency communication devices. The belayer did a good job of providing first aid.

One contributing factor in this event may have been the intense sun the ice climb had received over the previous several days, making the ice surface less secure than normal. The climber was forced to climb higher to find quality ice for his first ice screw, and his tool placements were not optimal. A second contributing factor may have been that the ice tools he used that day were not his regular tools. As a result, he may not have had the same "feel" for the placements as he usually did. A third influence may have been the fact that the group had an ambitious day of climbing planned. As a result, there was some pressure to move quickly on the climb.

The final lesson is that once an emergency signaling device is activated, it is best to leave it on until help arrives to avoid any delays.

Images

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