



AAC Publications

Cornice Fall – Skiing Unroped

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Wapta Icefields

Banff Dispatch received a personal locator beacon (PLB) activation signal near Balfour High Col on the Wapta Icefields at 1 p.m. on March 29. The Balfour High Col is the crux of the popular Wapta Icefields ski traverse and is a notorious place in which to get caught during poor weather. Common hazards at the Balfour High Col are crevasses, avalanches, and cliffs. These risks are compounded when bad weather moves in, resulting in whiteout conditions and difficult navigation.

Banff Visitor Safety (VS) staff tried repeatedly to access the area by helicopter on March 29, but were prevented by poor weather. At 8:30 p.m. the PLB was reactivated for six minutes. This signal originated from nearby Scott Duncan Hut. This was taken as a good sign because it was assumed at least some of the members of the party in distress were at the hut. Not knowing any of the details of the accident, the VS team continued to plan the rescue for the following day.

On March 30, VS staff members were able to access the Scott Duncan Hut and make contact with the party. There were ten skiers in the group. On March 29 one member of their group had broken through a cornice, falling approximately 150 to 200 meters down a steep slope or cliff on the other side. The fallen skier had lost both poles and one ski but was luckily uninjured. He was able to climb back up to the cornice lip. Over a period of several hours, the group was able to pull him back up over the cornice and then ski to the Scott Duncan Hut.

After meeting with VS staff at the Scott Duncan Hut, eight of the ten group members elected to finish the traverse as per their original plan. The skier who had fallen through the cornice and lost gear was evacuated via helicopter to Lake Louise, along with one other group member. An account of the story from the skier who fell through the cornice is available [here](#).

Analysis

The skier who broke through the cornice was extremely lucky to survive this fall. There have been several other incidents at this location resulting in fatalities. As stated earlier, the Balfour High Col is known for whiteout conditions, which make navigation difficult. This, combined with the many hazards in this crux area, results in frequent mishaps.

There are several important lessons from this incident. First, navigating through unknown glaciated terrain is very difficult in a whiteout and reduces your safety margin. If anything goes wrong, it may be difficult or even impossible for rescuers to access the site. Additionally, if you find yourself in a whiteout on a complex glacier, you will require solid navigation skills and appropriate technology, including a GPS and compass.

When traveling in a whiteout on an unknown glacier, wear a rope, know how to perform a rope rescue, and move slowly and cautiously. This group had been roped up all day for the ascent to the Balfour High Col. When they got to the top, they thought they were out of the most hazardous areas and unroped. Although it is awkward to ski downhill roped together, this accident could have been prevented if the team had simply stayed roped up.

If you are going to carry an emergency response device, it is best to have one that allows two-way

communication. With some PLBs, it is only possible to call for help and not possible for rescuers to communicate with a party in distress. Two-way communication devices such as satellite phones, VHF radios, or Delorme® inReach devices allow the rescue team to talk to the party in distress and determine the exact nature and location of the incident, what equipment is required, and the urgency of the situation. Additionally, if the situation is resolved and the party no longer needs help, this can be communicated to the rescue team and the rescue can be called off.

This group had the skills and equipment to call for help and perform a rope rescue from a difficult position. Additionally, because the group was large and well equipped, they were able to transport the skier back to the Scott Duncan Hut even though he was missing gear.

Images



The Balfour High Col on a bluebird day showing the complex nature of the glaciated terrain.

Article Details

Author	Robert Chisnall, Alpine Club of Canada
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	129
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports