



AAC Publications

Stranded – Darkness, Inexperience, Climbing Alone

California, Mt. Shasta, Avalanche Gulch–Casaval Ridge

On April 10 a male climber in his 20s attempted a solo ski ascent via Avalanche Gulch and Casaval Ridge. The weather was clear and the conditions ideal for such a trip. He started climbing at 4 a.m. and did not summit until 7 p.m. While descending, though it was still light out, he got disoriented. He had decided not to ski—he later said he couldn't get his skins off. He also mentioned that his GPS had stopped working. He decided to start glissading with his skis on his pack, but headed down the east side of the mountain. (Avalanche Gulch is on the south side.) While glissading, one of his skis fell off his pack. He was too tired to retrieve it and decided to leave his other ski too.

The climber ended up spending the night in an open bivy in the Mud Creek/Konwakiton Glacier area. He called 911 that night and also activated his SPOT device. Lead climbing ranger Nick Meyers, alerted to the situation at 2 a.m., tried numerous times to reach the climber without success. A plan was made to search for the climber the next morning. Early on April 11, Meyers reached the climber by phone, and through conversation and the SPOT device's signal, Meyers confirmed his location and talked him through walking over Sargents Ridge and down into the Old Ski Bowl. Meanwhile, Meyers asked for a California Highway Patrol (CHP) helicopter to fly over the area to confirm the climber's location and be available in case of injury. CHP spotted him on top of Sargents Ridge and picked him up from there. He suffered no injuries other than exhaustion and damaged pride—and the loss of a sweet pair of skis.

ANALYSIS

The climber was equipped with dual alpine ice axes with leashes, a harness, and various other top-notch gear. He was unfamiliar with the route and overburdened with his equipment. While it's great to be prepared, there is a line between having enough equipment and too much unnecessary gear. Better research and planning would have helped the climber pack the appropriate equipment for his adventure. Also, GPS units have limitations, including battery failure. One needs to have a map and compass, and the skills to use them, as backup. (Source: Mt. Shasta Wilderness Climbing Ranger Report 2015.)

Images

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