



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Snow – Inadequate Protection**

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Deep Freeze

**On March 31 we began the direct start of Deep Freeze, a rock chimney (M5-6) that finishes on a low-angle snow slope in a broad gully. This leads to a shelf before rambling ice and a final ice pillar (WI5-6).** My partner started up the chimney and found good protection before disappearing above some chockstones. I gradually fed out rope until suddenly a loud rumble flew over me and the rope pulled tight. I turned to see my partner on the snow below, partly suspended by the rope, which was wrapped around the right leg.

I immediately escaped the belay, rapped down to my partner, freed the leg from the rope, and set up another anchor to get us down the approach slope (about 100 feet of steep snow) to a wider snow platform where our packs were. My partner said that near the top of the snow gully, a large snow mushroom had collapsed from underneath, which caused the fall. The slide and fall distance likely totaled more than 100 feet.

My partner was in pain but was able to walk slowly with assistance. Unsure of spinal injury, we called for rescue. A climber passed by the area and provided us with additional help. About five hours later, two park rangers arrived. Several more hours passed before the rest of the rescue team arrived and set up a litter to lower my partner down the talus field. Nine hours passed from our first call for rescue until my partner got airlifted. The injuries included concussion, sprains, fractures, spinal injury, lacerations, and abrasions, but my partner was expected to make a good recovery.

### **ANALYSIS**

Two weeks later, I returned with another partner to recover the gear that we had left behind. I found the last pieces of gear my fallen partner had left: a small cam backed up by a nut. It was clear that the cam took all the force of the fall, since it was bent pretty severely. But it held. Reclimbing this pitch, I set up an intermediate belay above the chimney before starting up the low-angle snow slope. As I climbed, I was hyper-vigilant about looking for additional protection opportunities. Though I spent an inordinate amount of effort looking, even digging in the snow close to the rock, I could not find any reliable protection. One possibility may have been a picket, but this would be unusual gear to carry for a hard ice climb and for Rocky Mountain National Park's winter snow conditions. Another possibility could have been protection way off to the left, halfway up the slope. The only protection I found below the collapsed snow mushroom was a cam in a flared, icy crack—this was definitely “mental” protection.

Alpine climbing is always a balance between speed and risk. We try to move light and fast while mitigating risks. My partner and I are both experienced climbers, and we decided that the low-angle snow slope presented a manageable risk. In this case, we were mistaken. (Source: Anonymous partner of fallen climber.)

## Images



Rescuers transport an injured ice climber toward a helicopter landing zone on the frozen Loch in Rocky Mountain National Park. The snow gully in which the climber fell 100 feet or more is partially visible in upper right. NPS Photo

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