



AAC Publications

Rockfall – Near Miss With Rockslide

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Grand Sentinel from Moraine Lake

On August 15, 2014, Will Richardson-Little and I started hiking toward the Grand Sentinel at 7:20 a.m. from the Moraine Lake parking lot. Our objective was to climb the normal route on the south face (4 pitches, 5.9). We had a standard rack, double ropes, and helmets.

We reached Sentinel Pass about two hours later and started our descent toward the Sentinel. Following the guidebook description, we scrambled along the scree slopes on the left side of the valley (the same side as the Sentinel). The rock was loose and unsettled. A rock the size of a tennis ball fell past me, and I should have taken this as a sign. It had rained lightly the day before.

It took about 30 to 45 minutes to cross the scree slope to reach the Sentinel. After we'd completed the first pitch, between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m., we heard the sound of falling rock. A significant rockslide, lasting five minutes, occurred on the scree slopes we had just crossed, not half an hour earlier. The rockslide was 50 to 100 meters wide. Large boulders, the size of milk crates or possibly larger, were hurtling down with alarming force. The thunder, cracks, and rumbles of the slide could be heard across the valley. After the rockslide, my partner and I realized that we were very lucky. If we had been caught in that area, with nowhere to take cover, we both surely would have been killed.

ANALYSIS

The slide was likely due to warming temperatures in the late morning and melting snowpack high on Pinnacle Mountain, above the traverse. These conditions likely caused a large boulder or boulders to be released from the snow. The subsequent fall of these large rocks initiated a full rockslide. Scattered rockfall continued throughout the day.

We completed the standard route on the Grand Sentinel (an excellent climb) and descended directly downhill from the Sentinel and across the valley to return by the hikers' trail. Our alternative route was on the opposite side of the scree slopes, adding about 15 minutes to the hike out.

This near miss taught us a good lesson about being aware of objective hazards. When the day's goal is a rock climb, it can be easy to get shortsighted and forget that there are other, bigger hazards all around. In the alpine environment, it's smart to get a very early start, even for a short rock climb.

(Source: Eric Chow.)

Images



The climbers' shortcut from Sentinel Pass to the Grand Sentinel is exposed to rockfall from Pinnacle Mountain

Article Details

Author	Eric Chow
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	127
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports