



AAC Publications

Fall While Downclimbing – Failure to Self-Arrest

Alaska, Denali, West Buttress

On June 13, the six members of expedition “Extreme Travel” completed their orientation at the Talkeetna ranger station and flew to the Kahiltna Glacier to begin a West Buttress climb. The team moved to 17,200-foot camp on the eighth day of their trip. Despite a more rapid ascent profile than normally recommended, all members of the group reported feeling well.

On June 22, four members of the expedition departed for the summit. During their descent in the early morning hours of June 23, one of the climbers lost his footing and fell in the area of Zebra Rocks, at nearly 18,400 feet. This fall pulled the entire rope team off their feet, and none of the climbers was able to self-arrest on the hard snow surface. One climber sustained a closed head injury and was unresponsive for approximately 10 minutes, while another climber sustained a chest wall injury and possible broken rib(s).

The two uninjured teammates descended to high camp in search of assistance. They reached camp between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m. and made contact with Alaska Mountaineering School lead guide Rob Gowler, who relayed accident and patient status information to the NPS mountaineering rangers via radio. Based upon the severity of injuries reported, incident command decided that a helicopter rescue attempt would be most prudent. Pilot Andreas Hermansky flew to 14,200-foot camp, where mountaineering ranger Coley Gentzel boarded for a reconnaissance flight. A lenticular cloud over the mountain had descended to the area where the injured climbers were located and prevented a rescue attempt at that time. Hermansky returned to 7,200-foot camp to await an improvement in weather conditions near Denali Pass.

Meanwhile, that morning, multiple teams had departed 17,200-foot camp, headed toward the summit. At 8:25 a.m., Alpine Ascents International mountain guide Erin Pollock reached the location of the injured party. Pollock reported that both the climber with the injured rib(s) and the climber with the suspected head injury were ambulatory, and that, given these changes, the team felt they could descend to high camp with assistance from climbers on the route. Over the next hour, several other teams arrived at Denali Pass and a plan was devised to help the climbers back to camp. Blaine Horner of the “Compass Data” expedition (a former volunteer with the NPS mountaineering rangers) abandoned his own summit attempt to assist the two men. Horner safely managed a nearly four-hour descent of the headwall to high camp, where they arrived at 1:10 p.m. The injured climbers eventually descended the mountain under their own power.

ANALYSIS

This incident highlights an important principle regarding roped team travel. When snow surface conditions are soft and conducive to self-arresting, it may be appropriate to rely on rope teammates to stop the fall of another teammate. However, when the surface conditions become firmer, a team needs to add running protection or belays for protection, as self-arrest becomes more difficult if not impossible. Belaying or adding intermediate protection during roped travel may also be prudent when the slope angle increases or the terrain below has greater consequences in the event of a fall (e.g., cliffs or crevasses below). Too many times, an entire rope team falls as a result of not being able to stop the fall of one teammate. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images



Moderately steep snow climbing in the Zebra Rocks area, above 18,000 feet on Denali's West Buttress Route.

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