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Fatal Falls on Unusually Icy Peak

California, Angeles National Forest, Mt. San Antonio (a.k.a. Mt. Baldy)

In February, three people plunged to their deaths down icy chutes on Mt. San Antonio (a.k.a. Mt. Baldy) or nearby; two of these were attempting to hike to the top of the 10,069-foot mountain on the Devil's Backbone Trail; a third person slipped and fell from nearby Icehouse Saddle. Mt. Baldy is the third-highest mountain in Southern California.

On February 2, Daniel Nguyen (23) slipped on ice and slid 1,500 feet to his death from the Devil's Backbone. The following Saturday, February 6, saw no easing of unusually icy conditions, and a dozen people had to be airlifted off Mt. Baldy as a result. One hiker, 47-year-old Dong Xing Liu, wasn't so lucky, as he died after slipping from Icehouse Saddle, located in a drainage southeast of Baldy. His wife also fell and suffered serious injuries to her lower body.

In the Los Angeles Times, on February 8, Mt. Baldy Fire Department Captain Gordon Greene described the icy conditions as "almost like a mirror," saying that even "crampons wouldn't have helped." Twelve days later, on February 20, a 45-year-old San Diego man who was wearing crampons plummeted 1,500 feet down a steep, icy chute on the north side of Mt. Harwood, directly east of Mt. Baldy on the Devil's Backbone ridge. The man's two companions, neither of whom were injured, also were wearing crampons.

Winter conditions on Mt. Baldy's upper reaches have taken the lives of other climbers, including Ali Aminian and Michelle Yu, both experienced mountaineers, in 2004 and 2010, respectively.

ANALYSIS

For much of the year, Mt. Baldy is a hiking destination for peak baggers, with the Devil's Backbone trail being the normal route. In places the spectacular ridge is only a few feet wide, with talus filled gullies dropping away from either side of the ridge, but no technical climbing is involved. In certain winter conditions, however, crampons and ice axes may be necessary to negotiate the route, and mountaineering judgment—e.g., turning around in the face of severe conditions—is required. (Source: Clay Jackson, with information from the Los Angeles Times.)

Images

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