



AAC Publications

Glissading Without Ice Axes

Colorado, San de Cristo Mountains, Humboldt Peak

On May 26, two climbers took long falls and sustained injuries while descending from 14,064-foot Humboldt Peak. Starting in midmorning from a campsite at the trailhead, they had snowshoed to the upper mountain and then climbed the easy west ridge, reaching the summit at 6 p.m.

To save time on the descent, they decided to glissade a snow gully on the southeast side, a quicker route back to the trail. They attempted to use their boots and trekking poles to control the speed. About halfway down, the snow hardened or turned to ice and both climbers lost control of their glissade, sliding several hundred feet before coming to a stop. Both had injuries, including a torn rotator cuff, broken arm, bruised ribs, a mild concussion, cuts, and abrasions.

One of the climbers used her cell phone to call for help at around 7:20 p.m. Both climbers were able to walk, and they said they would continue down along safer terrain while a team from Custer County Search and Rescue headed up the trail. By midnight they had descended into the trees at around 10,200 feet, stopped to rest, and built a fire. Here, rescuers found them and led them to the trailhead.

ANALYSIS

Although Humboldt is one of the easier 14ers in summer, the late-winter conditions of May make any peak of this size a more serious proposition. In a detailed description of the incident at her blog, one of the climbers cited numerous “lessons learned,” including their failure to stick to a turnaround time or carry an adequate emergency kit. Fundamentally, however, this accident resulted from the decision to glissade unknown terrain without an ice axe. (Source: Turnthepayge.com.)

Images

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