



AAC Publications

Sliding Fall Before Roping Up

New Hampshire, Mt. Washington, Huntington's Ravine

At approximately 12:10 p.m. on Sunday, February 7, one member of a climbing party of three slipped while approaching a technical snow and ice climb in Huntington Ravine. The climber rapidly gained speed on the 35–40° snow slope beneath Central Gully and tumbled into the rocks below, sustaining non-life-threatening injuries.

As many parties do, this group planned to rope up at a terrain bench beneath the ice bulge marking the start of the steepest climbing in Central Gully. The most experienced climber went first and coached the two less experienced climbers to use both tools to climb 10 feet of exposed ice in order to reach the flat platform. The second and least experienced of the three slipped while climbing this section. After losing both ice tools, the climber managed to orient her feet downhill but soon caught a crampon in the snow. Starting to tumble, she came to a stop after falling approximately 200 feet, sustaining ankle and shoulder injuries.

ANALYSIS

Long, sliding falls are the leading cause of injuries in Tuckerman and Huntington ravines. Four days prior to this incident, temperatures on the mountain soared into the mid-30s (F) for over 24 hours. Following this, the temperature dropped to near 0°F. These conditions created a very hard and icy snowpack. Melt-freeze crusts can often make self-arresting impossible.

It is important to assess snow conditions and combine this with an honest assessment of the experience of members of a party. Depending on the competence and risk tolerance of party members, even low-angle snow slopes may need to be belayed in order to assure safe passage. The conditions this day were far from ideal and required a greater measure of security for a team that included novice alpine climbers. (Source: Mount Washington Avalanche Center.)

MORE FALLS ON MT. WASHINGTON: On March 13, two long, sliding falls caused serious injuries on Mt. Washington. In the first, a skier fell about 1,000 feet in Hillman's Highway and hit several rocks during his slide, requiring a helicopter evacuation. Soon afterward, a hiker on the summit cone fell and broke his femur while glissading terrain the party had not ascended. That weekend, icy conditions had been caused by warm, rainy weather followed by a hard freeze. In-depth accounts and analyses of these incidents and others may be found at mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org.

Images

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