



AAC Publications

Leader Fall on Ice – Thin Ice, Inadequate Protection

New York, Adirondacks, Pitchoff Mountain

My two partners and I (male, age 40), all experienced climbers, were in the Adirondacks on January 26 for the AAC Metro New York Section's Winter Outing. We decided to climb Screw and Climaxe, a well-known, 350-foot WI3+ on the north side of Pitchoff Mountain.

Screw and Climaxe is notoriously thin, particularly in the bottom section. From the base, the first pitch looked thin but climbable. I couldn't fully assess the thickness of the ice on the entire route because the wall was plastered with snow, but I could see plenty of ice near the top. Normally, I am very cautious and conservative, and I only lead if I can get good protection; I've retreated from several ice leads before. But the first part looked doable, so I decided to give it a try.

The thin first pitch led to a ledge about 75 feet up. The second pitch started with some low-angle sections with snow and ice accumulation, and I was able to put in a stubby ice screw. I headed for a shrub in a corner and found a frozen-in sling. I clipped that and backed it up with a poor nut in a shallow, icy crack. The next bit was a moderately angled slab covered in verglas. I placed a stubby screw partway into some softish ice, then spent some time trying different routes up the slab. There was a good belay stance at a tree about 15 feet up and far to the right. Above the tree, the ice appeared to be considerably more abundant. After considering my options, including retreat, I decided to climb toward the tree. I was about two-thirds of the way across the slab and 60 feet above the belay when I fell.

The top stubby screw and the worthless nut ripped out. My right leg hit the belay ledge, and I finally stopped falling about 15 feet from the base of the climb. The frozen sling on the shrub had held and kept me from hitting the ground.

The fall fractured my femur and patella, and cracked my sternum and skull. My partners called 911 and Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC) rangers responded quickly, reaching me two hours after the emergency call went out. Rescuers belayed a litter carrying me down talus to the pond at the base of Pitchoff, and then a sled pulled by a snowmobile brought me to a waiting ambulance.

The next day, when my partners and some friends went back to collect our gear, they estimated I had fallen 130 feet. I had surgery to place a rod and screws in my femur, and since then I have made a good recovery.

ANALYSIS

I should have chosen a different route with adequate ice, and I am now avoiding routes where I can't visually confirm the condition of the entire climb before starting up. When the route revealed itself to be in poor shape partway up, I should have retreated. I can't say precisely why I continued, except that I was motivated to finish so my partners could have a good day of climbing. Better communication with my partners would have helped. As it turns out, they had also been thinking that retreat would be the best option, given the conditions. If one of us had verbalized this suggestion, we probably all would have agreed to turn around. (Source: Anonymous report from the leader.)

Images



The thin slabs of Screw and Climaxe (WI3+) on Pitchoff Mountain.

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