



AAC Publications

Lost During Descent – Hypothermia, Frostbite

Oregon, Mt. Hood, South Side Route

A party of four Seattle climbers left Timberline Lodge early Saturday morning, January 2, for a summit climb via the Wy'East Face. High winds, cold temperatures, and icy conditions slowed the ascent. The party summited at 3 p.m., and with superficial frostbite developing, they quickly descended the south side unroped, using headlamps. Two of the male members had previously climbed the route and led the descent. The party spread out, with the female member, age 27, lagging behind. The three male climbers reached the lodge, but the female member descended to the west of the lodge, heading toward the distant lights of Government Camp.

The lost climber called 911, which initiated a Portland Mountain Rescue (PMR) call-out. The climber texted a photo of a trail sign, which helped rescuers pinpoint her location. (A screenshot of the subject's phone showing a GPS location was inaccurate by about a half-mile and was disregarded.) She was located, assessed, and rewarmed by the PMR team and then assisted to Government Camp. Here, an American Medical Response team evaluated her for frostbite and hypothermia, and recommended transport to the hospital for treatment.

ANALYSIS

Allowing the party to separate during descent was a major mistake, especially given the development of frostbite and hypothermia in the female climber. Her off-route descent was likely due to unfamiliarity with the route and the difficulty of using navigation tools (compass and GPS receiver) due to the onset of hypothermia. Nonetheless, her phone was instrumental to the eventual rescue—a good reminder to keep some juice in the phone battery until you're off the mountain. (Source: Jeff Scheetz, Portland Mountain Rescue)

Images

Article Details

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| Author | Jeff Scheetz, Portland Mountain Rescue |
| Publication | ANAM |
| Volume | 11 |
| Issue | 70 |
| Page | 80 |
| Copyright Date | 2017 |
| Article Type | Accident reports |