



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Burned Hands

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Mt. St. Bride

On August 23, two climbers were attempting the southeast ridge of Mt. St. Bride, near Lake Louise.

To gain the base of the route, climbers must do a 45-meter overhanging rappel. The first climber successfully rappelled and moved off to the side to perform a fireman's belay. The second climber came down partway, then stopped to remove his gloves because, he said, they were not working for him. As he was nearing the ground, he lost control and started to slide too quickly. His partner on the ground attempted to stop him by pulling the ropes tight, but one rope was hooked on scree so he was able to pull only one strand. This slowed the falling climber, preventing serious injury, but not enough to prevent rope burns to the rappeller's hands. The climbers were using 8.5mm half ropes, and the injured climber had a first-generation Petzl Reverso device and a prusik as a backup. However, the accessory cord was new and the prusik did not catch.

The climbers bandaged the wound and contemplated their options: try to climb back out to their bivy or descend to the east and undertake a long bushwhack back to camp (at least 20 kilometers or 12.5 miles). Neither option seemed reasonable, given the state of the injured climber's hands, so they called for a rescue.

ANALYSIS

Wearing gloves while rappelling will prevent rope burns but also may promote rapid rappels, which itself increases risk. A slow, steady rappel is always preferable. Thinner ropes afford less friction in rappel devices; check the device's recommended rope diameter range and comply with manufacturer guidelines. The weight of the rappeller (and pack weight) may be factor as well.

A prusik backup or other third-hand rappel backup requires greater care with thin ropes. It should be tested in a safe setting before a full rappel. The accessory cord used should be supple and at least 2mm thinner than the climbing rope.

Images

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