



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow – Not Wearing Crampons, Failure to Self-Arrest

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Disappointment Peak

On the morning of June 19, two climbers began ascending the Spoon Couloir of Disappointment Peak. The day was sunny and warm. Once the climbers reached the top of the couloir, they decided against continuing to the summit and instead planned to descend via the “Chockstone Couloir” (fourth class and steep snow) on the southeast ridge of Disappointment Peak.

At 1:30 p.m., at approximately 10,300 feet, one of the climbers (male, 68) slipped on snow and fell approximately 400 feet, dropping over a cliff along the way. He was not wearing crampons. Hikers who witnessed the fall reported the accident; they said the subject was moaning and blowing a whistle, and that they were unable to reach his location.

Ranger Marty Vidak, on patrol in the area, descended from near the summit of Disappointment Peak and reached the injured climber at 2:45 p.m., finding him in steep terrain approximately 300 vertical feet above Amphitheater Lake. He was treated and air evacuated to St. John’s Hospital, where he was found to have suffered flail chest, a thoracic cavity bleed, fractures of the T7 and L4 vertebrae, a fractured patella, and shoulder trauma. His partner, with the assistance of another climber, descended unharmed. (Source: National Park Service Search and Rescue Report.)

ANALYSIS

Wearing crampons and effectively utilizing an ice axe to self-arrest could have prevented this accident. The two climbers had experience on steep snow and were outfitted with boots, ice axes, crampons, helmets, and other appropriate equipment. The snow was firm at the site of the fall, and the climbers may have been lulled into a false sense of security after ascending the Spoon Couloir in softer snow, failing to anticipate the icier conditions on the descent. The patient’s helmet was damaged during the fall, suggesting it might have prevented another serious injury. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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