



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice – Transition Error, Inexperience

Michigan, Upper Peninsula, Munising

On February 17, during the Michigan Ice Fest, a woman and two men, all in their 20s, set out to climb the steep pillar of Strawberry Daze (WI4), approaching from the top. The men had climbed ice before but the woman, who borrowed ice climbing equipment from the festival, was a beginner.

Planning to top-rope, they rappelled about 25 meters down to a belay behind the pillar, where an icy ledge had formed high above the shore of Lake Superior. The woman was unable to complete the climb. Partway up, she decided it would be easier to ascend the climbing rope. She was carrying ascenders and successfully transitioned to ascending but was unable to make it to the top. Deciding to try climbing again, she began to transition back to a rappel to return to the ledge. During this transition, she fell about seven meters and landed on the belay ledge. She complained of substantial pain in her pelvis (which turned out to be bruised but not fractured).

The trio attempted to self-rescue from the top but were unable to get her out. It was a warm day (about 30°F), but they were starting to get cold. They had radios and called 911. The Coast Guard flew out a helicopter and put a rescuer onto the 45° ice slope at the base of the cliff, but the rescuer did not have crampons and was unable to climb the ice to the belay ledge.

Ice Fest leaders then organized a team of four professional climbers and guides to assist with the rescue. It was now pitch dark. The climbers were transported by tracked vehicle and snowmobile, and then went on foot to the scene. After rappelling to the belay ledge, the climbing rescuers were able to lower the woman about 25 meters to the icy shore. The Coast Guard flew the helicopter back with their rescue swimmer, who was able to get the injured climber into a scoop basket so she could be lifted out. All of the climbers were back at the trailhead by around 3:30 am.

ANALYSIS

Depending on the season, Strawberry Daze (rated WI4) can have very difficult sections, and the approach from above is somewhat committing. A climb that can be accessed from the bottom, where retreat is simple, would be a more appropriate choice for a new ice climber.

Backup knots or hitches should always be used when ascending or making any sort of transition in the safety system. Had the climber tied a backup hitch to the rappel rope before attempting to load her device, she probably would not have fallen.

In places where there is no established mountain rescue team, rescues may take substantially longer. Choose an appropriate adventure based on experience of the party, available equipment, and weather conditions. (Source: Karsten Delap.)

Images



Coast Guard rescue swimmer awaits a helicopter during a late-night mission. above Lake Superior.

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