



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice – Inadequate Tool Placements

New Hampshire, Cannon Cliff

On February 4, a team of climbers from Amherst, Massachusetts, was ascending the third and final pitch of the Black Dike (WI4 M3), Cannon Cliff's most popular ice climb. As the leader (male, age 47) moved up the final ice before the route turns to névé, both of his tools popped and he fell—first onto an ice bulge about 20 feet down and then farther down the ice until an ice screw he had placed held the fall. Rescuers estimate he fell 60 feet in total, breaking a lower leg.

The belayer lowered the injured climber down to his belay stance at the fixed anchor on the top of the second pitch. Climbers who were below on the Black Dike and on the nearby Fafnir rushed to assist the injured leader and dialed 911. New Hampshire Fish and Game, in addition to volunteer rescuers and a pair of guides who had just finished working for the day, hiked up from the parking lot with a sled, bringing the total number of rescuers to 14. The injured climber was attached to a volunteer with a rescue spider and lowered down the second pitch. Rescuers then completed a 120-meter lower down the first pitch and a snow slope at the base. They placed the patient in the litter and lowered and carried him down about 1,000 vertical feet of snow and talus to the bike path below, about five hours after the fall. A snowmobile then carried him to the road.

ANALYSIS

The Black Dike, a climb that receives no sun, is often prone to brittle, “dinner-plating” ice. Moreover, the heavy traffic this route receives creates a latticework of fractured ice. Extra care must be taken when moving on ice tool and crampon placements.

Using more frequent, gentle swings—instead of a few hard hits—in brittle ice helps to keep tool placements where they belong. Keeping picks, crampons, and ice screws sharp and not climbing above bad placements helps keep winter climbing from spinning out of control. Ice screws work well as protection, but this doesn't stop the relatively low angle of most ice climbs from creating serious falling hazard. (Source: Michael Wejchert, Mountain Rescue Service.)

Images



Rescuers working at the base of the Black Dike on Cannon Cliff, still about 1,000 vertical feet above the trail.

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