



AAC Publications

Ptarmigan Traverse Ice Collapse

Washington, North Cascades National Park, Ptarmigan Traverse

On July 30, my climbing partner, Stefan Goldberg (62) and I (67, both highly experienced mountaineers) began the Ptarmigan Traverse, climbing north to south. Our plan was to spend 12 days on the route, go as far as time permitted, and double back to the trailhead after climbing satellite peaks along the route. However, wildfire smoke conspired against us, making navigation and climbing more hazardous, so after five days we decided to retreat toward Kool Aid Lake.

On August 3, we traversed a rock feature called the Red Ledges. When we had crossed this on the way in, a snow ramp had contacted the rock directly and the transition was straightforward. We now found a far different scenario, with a melted-out ramp that created a gap of about eight to ten feet and necessitated a rappel of 15 to 20 feet. Temperatures in nearby Marblemount had exceeded 100°F the last several days, which greatly contributed to the rapid melt-out. A moat barrier now presented itself, and what had once been a snow ramp was now an icy serac or fin with an adjoining snow cornice.

Thankfully, a climbing party of four who had started the traverse a day ahead of us had left a sling with two carabiners over a rock horn for a rappel. Stefan went first, rappelling about 20 feet into the moat. He placed an ice screw into hard, nearly vertical snow and attached a sling and extra carabiner to this to assist my transition from rock to snow. He then surmounted the snow wall with two front-point kicks, using one ice axe, and started to traverse out of the moat. He was about eight feet left of the ice serac, moving away from it, when, to my horror, I observed a crack open up at the juncture of the serac and snow wall and run directly toward Stefan. As the crack reached him, another crack opened up, perpendicular to the first. Stefan fell straight down into the moat among tumbling snow and ice blocks. It was like watching a horror video in slow motion.

The ice serac tumbled over sideways until it was stopped by contact with the adjacent rock and vertical snow ledge. I feared the serac would break apart and bury Stefan deep in the moat or make contact with the rope, rip out the anchor sling, and pull me down. I could see some daylight in the depths of the moat, and after several seconds of silence Stefan yelled out, "I'm OK." Miraculously, he had suffered only superficial wounds to his arm and minor head and neck discomfort. He climbed the sloping moat with his 60-pound pack, advancing his prusik up the rappel rope as self-protection, then transitioned onto the edge of the newly inverted serac. He placed an ice screw and transitioned back onto solid snow, where he placed a snow picket. I then rappelled to the serac edge, surmounted it, and removed the screw and picket. We traversed the snowfield to an adjacent talus field, where we thanked our creator that we were still alive.

ANALYSIS

The extreme heat undoubtedly played a major role in the instability of the icy serac and snow ramp. Visual inspection revealed no obvious problems, except for the snowy cornice, which Stefan climbed past with no problems. There might have been a better way to get through the moat, but the serac could have fallen whichever way we went. Simply put, we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the positive side, we made several good decisions by relying on a good, strong anchor, using a backup prusik on the rappel, and wearing helmets. (Source: Ed McCord.)

Images



Before (left) and after photos of the ice bridge that collapsed on the Red Ledges traverse.



The icy fin in center collapsed and knocked the photographer into a moat just as he rappelled from the Red Ledges above. Fortunately, he had only minor injuries.

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