



AAC Publications

Fall and Avalanche – Inexperience, Climbing Alone

Idaho, Lost River Range, Borah Peak

Hao Yan, 23, had come to Idaho from the East Coast to fight forest fires, and in June he decided to attempt 12,662-foot Borah Peak. Climbing solo, he started before dawn but got lost on the approach, and by the time he reached the main difficulties on the northeast ridge it was 6 p.m. A steep rock step (complicated by mixed climbing in June) bars access to the top. The climber started up this section, using a rope and some form of self-belay, but 20 to 25 feet up, his “anchor suddenly broke from the rock” and he fell to the base of the step, then continued sliding down the north side of the mountain in an avalanche triggered by his fall. He came to a stop several hundred feet down, tangled in gear and reportedly buried up to his neck in snow.

The climber attempted to continue down the mountain, but pain in his legs, neck, and back prevented him from moving far. He was able to get a signal on his mobile phone and called for help around 9:30 p.m. Custer County Search and Rescue decided to call for a helicopter team from Kalispell, Montana, to expedite the search, and at around 2 a.m. rescuers spotted the climber in a snowfield below the north face. He was flown to a hospital and treated for hypothermia and possible spinal fractures.

(Sources: East Idaho News and other published reports, online interview with the climber.)

ANALYSIS

Hao Yan reported having some mountaineering experience, including taking classes with Colorado Mountain School. This northeast ridge can be climbed at class 4 in ideal conditions and if the correct route is followed, but many climbers encounter 5th-class terrain. In June it would have significant snow or mixed climbing. Although it's not known exactly what caused his fall, starting the crux after 6 p.m. meant he likely was fatigued and had very little time for a safe ascent and descent. Climbing alone, he was very fortunate to have a viable cell phone signal to call for help after his tumble.

(Source: The Editors.)

Images



The north face of Borah Peak (12,662 feet), with the northeast ridge on the left skyline. The climber fell from the prominent rock step at the bottom of the steep ridge and then slid down snow below the north face.

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