



AAC Publications

Leader Fall On Ice – Inadequate Protection, Fatigue

New Hampshire, Crawford Notch, Mt. Willard

On February 23, a local climbing guide, age 64, took his client to Mt. Willard, a popular area for moderate, multi-pitch ice climbs. The weather was warm, and by early afternoon freezing rain was falling. At around 1 p.m., the guide short-roped his client across a talus slope to the base of Left Hand Monkey Wrench (WI3). He placed a stubby screw on the climb's initial 20-foot traverse in order to protect his client and then placed one 13cm screw about halfway up the pitch. He headed into the narrow choke at the top of the climb, where he considered placing a third screw to protect the exit but did not do so. As he topped out the climb, his tool popped and he fell: first 20 feet onto a bench below the choke, and then an additional 20 feet. The upper 13cm screw and the belayer held his fall. The impact fractured the climber's right femur just below the hip and broke his right elbow in three places.

The guide instructed his client to tie a catastrophe knot in the belay rope to prevent him from falling further. She then ascended to his position using his weight as a counterbalance. He had come to rest in a nook in the ice, and the pair was able to work the injured guide into his emergency tarp to guard against hypothermia. They called his guiding service, and members of Mountain Rescue Service (MRS) and other guides who were on adjacent climbs rushed over to help. MRS was able to build an anchor to transfer the injured guide into a litter and then lower him through the talus and down the remaining 400 feet of steep approach gully. From there he was carried to the road, arriving around 7:30 p.m.

ANALYSIS

The length and severity of the guide's fall can be attributed to not placing a screw before the final section of climbing on the pitch. The climber was more than qualified for the difficulty of the terrain and moving quickly because he was guiding. He attributes the fall to late-season tiredness and not judging his own physical state properly before heading out. These factors are common in accidents involving guides, who will often climb quickly and without adequate protection on easy, familiar terrain. Such accidents often occur late in the day when guides are mentally exhausted.

Though the Mt. Willard area is more or less a roadside crag, the steepness of the approach and its positioning—at the apex of windy Crawford Notch—means that carrying a light emergency shelter (such as the guide's tarp) is prudent. Climbers in mountainous terrain also should carry a communication device that will allow them to call for help when cell phone service is nonexistent. (Source: Michael Wejchert, Mountain Rescue Service.)

Images

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