



AAC Publications

Ice Climbing Ground Fall – Rapidly Changing Conditions

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Mt. Wilson

ON MONDAY, March 12, an experienced party had decided to climb the route Ice Nine on Mt. Wilson.

This is a 90-meter, WI6 route that had been seeing frequent ascents and was described as being in “WI5” shape. The weather was clear, with cold overnight temperatures and warm days, resulting in increasing avalanche danger throughout the day. The party had started early to take advantage of the cold weather and low avalanche danger in the morning and to be out of the area before conditions deteriorated.

At around 7 a.m., the leader started up the first pitch. When he was about four meters up, his tool sheared through some chandelier ice and he fell to the ground. He landed on his feet, but complained of back pain and other concerns. The party had a radio, so they called Parks Canada for help.

Two Parks Canada rescue specialists responded via helicopter from Banff. They slung onto the site, immobilized the injured climber, and slung him to a waiting ambulance. The climber was transported by ambulance to Banff, where it was confirmed that he had several stable spinal compressions. The full injuries were not discovered until later with an MRI: He ended up having four stable compression breaks in his lower back and a cracked pelvis. They did not require surgery.

ANALYSIS

Waterfall ice is a dynamic medium, and climbing it safely requires experience, skill, and attention to changing conditions. The danger can be minimized, but there will always be a certain level of risk accepted by waterfall ice climbers. The injured climber wrote an in-depth analysis of the decision-making factors influencing this incident:

- (1) **Fatigue.** He had a poor sleep the night before and an early morning start. It was the end of a long trip, and he was going home in a few days, so his mind was on other things.
- (2) **Familiarity.** He had climbed Ice Nine a few times earlier that season, and it was in good shape. He felt it would be a relatively easy day.
- (3) **Peer pressure.** Some friends had come up right behind them. The injured climber didn't feel overly pressured but stated that he likely rushed more than normal.
- (4) **Not adapting to changing conditions.** The climb had freshly formed chandelier ice on the surface. The leader had already downclimbed the first five meters once, due to the conditions, and was checking out a new line when he fell. In his words: “About ten to 15 [feet] off the ground I started to slow down and consider my options again. I didn't like it, but it did look okay higher up. As I was pondering my options, one of my tools sheared and I pitched. It was too low to have gear in, and the ice was horrible anyway. My mistake was not in the protection system but rather my inability to slow down and climb more carefully. Conditions had changed rapidly.”

From a rescuer's perspective, this party did many things that made the rescue quick and safe:

- (1) The party had a VHF radio programmed with the Parks Canada frequencies so they could talk

directly to emergency dispatchers. This allowed the rescue specialists to accurately gauge the severity of the situation, determine what resources would be required, and pass instructions to the injured climbers. Parks Canada encourages backcountry users who will be out of cell range to carry a properly programmed VHF radio, a satellite phone, or two-way satellite texting devices for emergency communications.

(2) The party had started early and had their accident early in the day. This allowed rescuers to perform the rescue before avalanche danger rose in the afternoon.

(3) The party moved the injured climber to a spot with decreased overhead danger from ice daggers, and they chopped out a platform to help with immobilization. This sped up the patient packaging once rescuers arrived. (Sources: Parks Canada and the climber.)

Images



Accident site below the Ice Nine route on Mt. Wilson. The patient fell to the ground when a tool sheared through chandelier ice.



Rescuer arriving by helicopter at the accident scene.

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