



## AAC Publications

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### **Howse Peak, East Face, New Route and Tragedy**

Canada, Alberta, Canadian Rockies

The east face of Howse Peak (3,295m), showing the line followed by Auer, Lama, and Roskelley. Their route started on M16, then traversed left to a bowl above Life By the Drop, continuing to the top with difficult mixed climbing. During their descent, an avalanche of ice and snow swept them from the upper bowl. Photo from Parks Canada

**The following report is based on the photographic record and the equipment found with Hansjörg Auer, David Lama, and Jess Roskelley after an accident on April 16 on the east face of Howse Peak. Jess' iPhone was found on him at the base of the face.** The phone provided exact time, altitude, and GPS locations from each of his photos, which not only proved they made the summit of the 3,295-meter peak, but also gave clues to the location of their new route, a variation of the climb M-16.

On my second trip (of three) to the accident site on June 2, Tim Sanford, a good friend of Jess, and I found David Lama's GoPro and Hansjörg Auer's camera, both with valuable, informative photos. Using Jess's iPhone as the control for time and location, I sequenced David's and Hansjörg's photos into a time line, which enabled Grant Statham and Steve Holeczi, two of the SAR and recovery personnel, to determine the route they climbed pitch by pitch. The evidence shows they climbed the east face of Howse from their camp at the base to the summit, an altitude gain of 1,340m, in less than seven hours. Their ascent is a tribute to their strength, talent, and tenacity. Their deaths prove once again, though, that the mountain passes final judgment on success or failure.

The three men, all members of the North Face athlete team, arrived in Canmore the first week in April to test a new proprietary waterproof fabric and a specially designed clothing system. They had a number of difficult routes on their agenda, and within a short period of time made ascents of Andromeda Strain and Nemesis, a 160m WI6 waterfall climb in thin spring conditions.

While they were waiting out bad weather in Canmore, Jess called me numerous times to talk about their previous two climbs and one last objective, the east face of Howse Peak. On April 14, while at the climbing gym in Canmore, Jess asked about the descent routes off the summit, as I had climbed the Northeast Buttress route many years before. We concluded their ascent route, which we didn't discuss, would be the logical choice for descent.

Early on the morning of April 15, the three drove from Canmore to the Waterfowl Lakes parking area, put on their skis and packs, and departed at 11 a.m. for the 8km ski to camp. Within one hour they were at Chephron Lake, and by 12:40 p.m. all three had reached their campsite on the glacier below the east face. That evening, Hansjörg took several photos of small powder snow avalanches sweeping their intended route.

By 5:51 the next morning, April 16, in cold, but clear weather, with Hansjörg on foot and David and Jess on skis, they had climbed the lower snow slopes below M-16, a difficult mixed climb with only one previous ascent (Backes-Blanchard-House, 1999, completing the face but not reaching the summit). Leaving the skis, all three climbers reached the bottom of the first difficulty, a WI6 waterfall, before 7 a.m. Hansjörg grabbed the first lead and, after waiting out a spindrift avalanche that swept over him, quickly climbed the vertical frozen waterfall in 15 minutes. Another 15 minutes saw all three climbers at the top of the pitch.

Hansjörg Auer at 9:57 a.m. on April 16, partway up the 1,000-meter east face of Howse Peak. Photo by Jess Roskelley

Whether seeking a new variation or finding the two routes above them—M-16 and Howse of Cards—out of condition this late in the season, David traversed left along a snow band toward a difficult right-to-left leaning ramp. Jess followed using a Petzl Micro Traxion to self-belay, while David belayed Hansjörg. They climbed approximately 80m up the ramp before David traversed left again—it was now 8:36 a.m.— along another horizontal snow band in search of the upper pitches of the “King Line,” a name given by Steve House to an unclimbed mixed route left of M-16. David led a WI6+ waterfall pitch, and Jess and Hansjörg quickly followed. At the top of the waterfall, they untied and stored the ropes in their packs. Fifty minutes later, at 9:42 a.m., Hansjörg took a photo of David and Jess approaching the top of a long snow gully above the “King Line” waterfall. Blocked by difficult mixed climbing, the three traversed left, yet again, to reach a large, concave snow basin above a waterfall route known as Life By the Drop.

Ankle-deep in sun-warmed snow, Jess took the lead up the moderate snow basin to reach the southwest ridge. At 11:02 a.m., Jess, trailing a single rope, led a mixed pitch along the ridge. After 330m of difficult mixed climbing, the threesome reached the summit prior to 12:41 PM. The sun was shining, but a few clouds were starting to move in. Both Hansjörg and Jess used the opportunity to take summit photos of the three of them in their heavy down coats.

Sometime after Jess’ summit photo taken at 12:44 p.m., the three climbers began their descent. Hansjörg continued to take a few photos as they made rappel after rappel down the ridge. At 1:27 p.m., Hansjörg took the last photo found on any of the three cameras. The photo is probably of David at the bottom of their final rappel off the southwest ridge into the snow basin. Their ascent tracks can be seen reaching the ridge crest in the bottom right corner of the photo.

Just before 2 p.m., Quentin Roberts, an experienced alpinist living in Canmore, stopped his car along the Icefields Parkway on his way back from a climb farther north to examine the routes on Howse Peak. As he and his partner stood looking at the east face, an avalanche, possibly from a cornice break, swept the basin above the route Life by the Drop and billowed onto the glacier at the bottom of the face. They did not know that Hansjörg, David, and Jess were on the face at the time. Roberts ran to his car for his camera and took a photo of the massive snow cloud forming at the bottom of the face. It was 1:58 p.m., 31 minutes after the three climbers had entered the basin.

Allison, Jess’s wife, and Joyce, his mother, spoke multiple times on the evening of April 16 and the morning of April 17. Jess always phoned in after a climb, and he had told Alli they would be out of the mountains that night. No matter where he was, if he was able, he would have texted his position to her on his Garmin InReach device.

At 7:30 a.m. on April 17, I called Royal Canadian Mounted Police dispatch, which put me in touch with a Parks Canada ranger. I told him where the men were climbing and that we were concerned they hadn’t checked in. Parks Canada immediately dispatched a ranger to the Waterfowl Lakes parking lot to see if Jess’ truck was still there. It was.

A Parks Canada search and rescue team was notified, and several members were flown by helicopter to the base of the east face of Howse Peak. The weather had changed overnight, and clouds blanketed the upper slopes of the mountain. Visibility was limited to the bottom half of the face. As they flew toward the avalanche cones at the bottom of the face, the rangers were drawn to a dark shadow in the snow. A close inspection of the scene from the helicopter indicated at least one climber, possibly two, were buried halfway up the large avalanche cone below the route Life By the Drop.

Roskelley, Auer, and Lama on the summit.  
They climbed the east face in less than seven hours.  
Photo by Jess Roskelley

Avalanche conditions were extreme, so the SAR team decided not to put a team on the ground. Because the climbers were not wearing transceivers, the team tossed two large fluorescent traffic cones and two avalanche beacons where the climber(s) were located and then departed. For the next four days, bad weather prevented any search and rescue or recovery efforts.

On April 20, the weather was clear and sunny. A helicopter carrying a few SAR team members flew up and down the east face, over the summit, and around the mountain, looking for signs of survivors. Nothing was seen after a meticulous search. They then concentrated their efforts on recovery.

The SAR team, plus a recovery dog and her handler, were flown to a staging area below the face and out of avalanche danger. In teams of two, they were attached to long lines below the helicopter and flown to where they thought the climbers were buried. As the pilot held the helicopter steady 100 feet above, the SAR rangers, still attached to the long lines, probed the avalanche cone. After four days of snow and wind, they could not locate the climbers. As the avalanche danger increased and the light became poor, the search operation was suspended for the day.

The following day, rangers were flown back to the staging area, and after two unsuccessful attempts to probe for the climbers, the pilot picked up the dog and her handler and long-lined them into the site. The handler let the dog search a wider area, and she soon located one of the climbers. The rangers were flown back to dig and expose the three climbers, who were buried close together. The rangers quickly cut their two 50m ropes in as many as 30 places to free the climbers from the ice and each other. They were then placed in cargo netting and long-lined to the staging area and eventually to ambulances waiting on the highway.

More likely than not, the avalanche photographed by Roberts after the climbers entered the snow basin and before they exited onto the traverse toward the gully above the "King Line" swept them to their deaths. Evidence from the ropes and equipment suggests the climbers did not rope up once they had rappelled into the basin. The last photo shows they rappelled off the ridge into the basin using the entire lengths of the two 50m ropes. The climbers stayed unroped and, as competent as they all were, would have plunge-stepped quickly down the slope toward the traverse.

When found, their two ropes were still joined for rappelling with an overhand knot and long tails backed up with a second overhand. In addition, there were two loops formed with overhand knots. After the ropes were pulled from the rappel into the basin, one of the climbers, most likely Jess, must have located the marked centers of the two ropes, and then tied an overhand knot at the center with a 20-inch loop. I believe that Jess, who had by far the most rope wrapped around him when the climbers were found, tied the big loop in the center, put it over his shoulder, and then loop-coiled the rest of the two ropes over his neck. He planned to carry it this way across the traverse and down to the next rappel.

I think Jess also tied the fourth knot, a standard-sized overhand loop, approximately 21 feet below the center loop on two of the four strands, and put it through the carabiner attached to the ferrule on one of his tools, possibly as a moveable anchor as he descended. There's strong evidence that Jess attached this smaller loop to one of his tools and that Jess had placed his ice tool with significant effort into the ice as a fixed point, with the smaller knot attached, prior to the cornice break. The force that hit all three climbers by the cornice or avalanche snapped the ferrule of his ice tool at the point where it's pinned to the shaft, and the carabiner through the ferrule was found twisted, with the gate sprung permanently open. The two overhand knots with loops were pulled so tight it's like they were woven of steel.

When found and recovered, Hansjörg was not connected to a rope; David had one strand of rope through a locking carabiner that may or may not have been locked; and Jess was probably attached to his tool in some way, but with the breaks in the rope from the fall and cuts by the rangers, and the broken carabiner, it's difficult to determine how he was attached. By their location on the harnesses, the ropes found through the carabiners on David and Jess were probably accidentally inserted through

the gates as they tumbled to the glacier, because both climbers were wrapped in multiple strands of rope.

In conclusion, it's unlikely the accident was caused by a fall, simply because the evidence shows they were unroped and, if one had fallen, chances are they wouldn't have taken out the other two. All the evidence indicates they were swept to their deaths in that short window of 31 minutes from the time they dropped into the basin and the photo from the highway confirmed an avalanche. It doesn't bring them back into our arms, but the final story of their last climb gives some closure to their families, friends, and loved ones.

– John Roskelley, USA

**Editor's Note:** After this report was finalized for the 2020 edition of the AAJ, Grant Statham of Parks Canada provided additional details and corrections on the chronology of the search effort. This version reflects these revisions.

## Images



Hansjörg Auer at 9:57 a.m. on April 16, partway up the 1,000-meter east face of Howse Peak. x



David Lama belaying Hansjörg Auer on a steep ice pitch on Howse Peak.



David Lama breaking through deep snow high on the east face of Howse Peak on April 16.



The east side of Howse Peak in the Canadian Rockies. Blue: Life by the Drop (1999). Red: Auer-Lama-Roskelley Line (2019). Yellow: M16 (1999). Purple: Howse of Cards (2002). Green: Northeast Buttress (1967). Parks Canada



Roskelley, Auer, and Lama on the summit. They climbed the east face in less than seven hours.



Auer, Lama, Roskelley variation on Howse Peak April 16 2019:  
The east face of Howse Peak (3,295m), showing the line followed by Auer, Lama, and Roskelley. Their route started on M16, then traversed left to a bowl above Life By the Drop, continuing to the top with difficult mixed climbing. During their descent, an avalanche of ice and snow swept them from the upper bowl.

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