



AAC Publications

Stranded – Extended Storm

Alaska, Denali, Kahiltna Base Camp

In early March, a team of two climbers (male, 48, and female, 36) returned to Kahiltna base camp at the conclusion of a winter expedition on the West Buttress. They had left a five-day cache of food at base camp, but when a large weather system moved over the Alaska Range, they were unable to fly out as planned. They were in camp for a total of eight and a half days, the last three and a half days without food. After they notified their air taxi service of their situation and requested assistance, the NPS prepared multiple contingencies to rescue these climbers by air or ground. However, a predicted break in the weather on day eight of the storm allowed the air taxi service to retrieve the team.

ANALYSIS

This incident shows that even when prepared for the perceived worst case, a more severe scenario may unfold. These climbers had made conservative risk management decisions during their ascent and descent, in addition to having a contingency cache of food and supplies at base camp. While it might seem unnecessary to plan for an eight- to 10-day storm, every climbing season in the Alaska Range seems to bring such extended storms, which trap climbers along various routes. The more teams prepare in advance, the more comfortable and survivable these long storm cycles will be.

(Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images

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