



AAC Publications

Mt. Shasta Annual Summary

California, Mt. Shasta and Castle Crags Wilderness

In 2019 there were 16 climbing-related incidents on Mt. Shasta. Twelve accidents were due to falls on ice or snow, and four climbers attempting the summit became lost. This is the second year of above-average rescues on Mt. Shasta, and one accident resulted in a fatality.

On May 11, a 53-year-old male climber who had separated from his party fell at the Heart (12,300 feet), was unable to self-arrest, and tumbled approximately 1,000 feet. His fall was slowed and eventually stopped by two climbers who “jumped on him” as he slid in the Upper Moraine. He suffered facial trauma, a left shoulder/arm injury, and a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Other climbers built a platform and secured the patient to the slope with an ice axe anchor. As responders prepared the patient for evacuation, two of the climbers moved upslope with their shovels to deflect falling rime ice, which was greater than normal and a real objective hazard. The climber was evacuated by helicopter.

On June 2, a female climber, age 23, slipped while skinning toward Helen Lake, falling approximately 500 feet. Mt. Shasta climbing rangers responded to the injured climber and conducted a patient assessment that revealed a femur fracture. They constructed a snow platform and attempted to apply a makeshift traction device until a California Highway Patrol (CHP) helicopter arrived to evacuate the injured climber. On June 8, a male, age 39, fell while skiing in Avalanche Gulch and slid 600 feet, suffering probable broken ribs. He too was evacuated by helicopter. Both skiers' falls happened on days when the snow was very smooth and icy.

On June 9, three separate accidents occurred on Shasta. The first, at 5:50 a.m., happened when a 60-year-old male slipped in Avalanche Gulch and fell head first for 800 feet until stopped by two climbers. The climber was unconscious for five minutes and suffered a TBI and facial trauma. Later in the morning, a climber slipped and fell on the west face route. Little is known about how this accident occurred, but the climber suffered minor abrasions and an unknown leg injury. The final accident of the day occurred in Avalanche Gulch at 1 p.m. when a 49-year-old male fell while descending and suffered abrasions and lacerations to his lower back, lower chest, and arms.

On June 14, a male climber, age 76, slipped and fell on the Avalanche Gulch route. The accident occurred when the climber saw one of his partner's crampons come loose and attempted to stop the crampon from sliding down the hill. The climber lost his ice axe and slid 300 feet before hitting a large ice block. He suffered a fractured thumb, a minor neck fracture, rib fracture, and large leg contusion. The climber was hoisted and evacuated by helicopter.

On August 14, two climbers summited Mt. Shasta via the Clear Creek Route. This was the conclusion of an extended hiking trip that began in Ashland, Oregon, and traversed seven wilderness areas. Reaching the summit late in the day, the pair decided to bivvy near the top. The next morning the party mistakenly descended the Whitney Glacier rather than their intended route down the west face. They did not have ice axes, crampons, helmets, or other mountaineering gear—only running shoes with short gaiters for footwear. The two decided they would try to glissade down the head of the Whitney Glacier. The two began their glissade together, with the female climber hugging her boyfriend from behind. They quickly lost control, sliding directly into a bergschrund at approximately 13,000 feet. The male climber landed face-first on the downhill side of the bergschrund, breaking his sunglasses on the firm snow and ice, but was otherwise uninjured. The female climber landed directly on top of him

and then fell back into the bergschrund, landing about 25 feet down. Fortunately, she was able to catch herself on a small ice shelf but was unable to climb out. Miraculously, good cell service inside the crevasse allowed a 911 call. Siskiyou County SAR and USFS rangers responded immediately and inserted ranger Nick Meyers to the scene. He constructed a snow anchor and lowered a rope to the injured climber. After conducting a quick verbal assessment of her injuries and instructing her on how to secure herself to the rope, ranger Meyers and the boyfriend manually hoisted her to the surface as she stemmed up the sides of the crevasse. The injured climber was evacuated by helicopter hoist; she had suffered minor cuts and bruises, and was very cold and humbled.

The very next day, August 15, a 30-year-old male climber fell while attempting a one-day climb of the Avalanche Gulch route. He and his partner were equipped with lightweight distance-running-style backpacks, Gore-tex running shoes, micro-spikes instead of crampons, and ice axes. The team got off route above Helen Lake, moving right onto the flank of Sargents Ridge, a steep snow slope known locally as the Alaska Chute. About halfway up, the climber attempted to adjust his micro-spikes as they were beginning to come off. He slipped while doing so and fell several hundred feet, hitting a rock and severely injuring his right ankle. Rangers lowered the patient by SKED to the upper moraine above Helen Lake, from which he was evacuated by helicopter.

The final accident of the 2019 climbing season on Mt. Shasta, on August 31, resulted in a fatality when a 27-year-old male slipped and fell while descending in Avalanche Gulch. The climber was a member of a larger party that was off-route (far climber's left) on the slope of Casaval Ridge. An older member of the team had slipped, injuring his leg and face, and the team had decided to descend rather than continue up the mountain. They prepared to use a rope to lower the injured climber. At this point, the 27-year-old decided to descend by himself without using the rope. What exactly occurred at this point is unknown, as the fall was unobserved, but the team later found the climber unconscious, with head injuries and facial trauma. A local paramedic and flight crew member who was climbing at the time, Scott Halferman, came to the immediate aid of the climber, along with rangers and members of the CHP helicopter crew. Unfortunately, the climber succumbed to his injuries on September 2.

ANALYSIS

Search and rescue incidents on Mt. Shasta were elevated for the second year in a row, even as the number of summit passes remained only slightly above the yearly average of passes since 1997. Winter and spring storms resulted in heavy snowpack on the mountain, but late storms (into May) did little to discourage climbers. As in previous years, falls on steep snow and failure to self-arrest were the primary cause for injury.

Rangers at Mt. Shasta continually focus their education efforts on the importance of self-arrest, navigation in mountainous terrain, proper preparation (skills, ability, and equipment), and how to plan for self-rescue. These skills and having situational awareness are keys to a successful summit and descent. (Source: Mt. Shasta and Castle Crags Wilderness 2019 Climbing Ranger Report and Search and Rescue Incident Narratives.)

Images



The Whitney Glacier on the north side of Mt. Shasta. The circle marks a crevasse that two under-equipped climbers/hikers slid into during an attempted glissade.

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