



AAC Publications

Ridge Collapse in 4th-Class Terrain

Montana, Absaroka Range, Mt Cowen

On the morning of July 14, at 4:30 a.m., Jackson Negri (25), Travis Swanson (33), and Will Hitchcock (29) began hiking from the East Mill Creek trailhead with the intention of group soloing Mt. Cowen via the northeast are te. This route is a prominent granitic ridge that runs for about 1,000 vertical feet directly to the 11,212-foot summit; it is mostly 4th-class terrain with a few 5.6 crux sections. Due to the perceived low risk and their plan to solo the route and then walk off the southwest side of the mountain, the three climbers decided not to take gear (rope, harness, or helmets). They did have a light medical kit, cellphones, a handheld radio, and a Garmin inReach.

The day was almost perfectly clear when the group reached the start of the route and began climbing. At 10:48 a.m., they were roughly halfway up. Negri was about 30 feet in front of the others when he heard a scream from Swanson and saw rockfall, including a car-size boulder, tumbling into the Strawberry Creek drainage to the north. Based on the location of the rockfall, it seems the climbers were standing on a large section of the ridge when it collapsed underneath them. Negri began downclimbing the route and found no sign of Swanson or Hitchcock. At 10:51 a.m., he called 911 via his cellphone, and Gallatin County Search and Rescue (GCSAR) was dispatched shortly afterward.

Negri deduced that his partners had fallen into a couloir that parallels the ridge. In order to access the couloir, Negri continued to downclimb their route to a ledge that led into the couloir. He then was able to look up the couloir, and from this vantage point he could see Hitchcock lying face-first in the snow with dark blood around his head. Negri found Hitchcock with numerous severe injuries; he was responsive to pain but not able to speak. He was partially buried in snow and pinned under a large boulder that had prevented him from continuing to fall down the 45° to 50° slope. Negri bandaged Hitchcock with his medical kit and began excavating a snow platform while simultaneously digging Hitchcock out from under the boulder and keeping him from sliding down the couloir.

Six members of GCSAR responded using two separate helicopters, with the rst team making visual contact with the climbing party at approximately 12:30 p.m. At 12:50 p.m. Negri looked down the couloir and identi ed Swanson's body wedged in a slot that ran along the edge of the couloir. The first team of responders arrived and began assisting Hitchcock at 1:08 p.m. They short-hauled him at 1:46 p.m. to an awaiting air ambulance stationed near the highway. The second GCSAR team accessed Swanson at 2 p.m. but found him deceased due to head trauma.

Hitchcock suffered a fractured C2 vertebra, a chipped left femur, traumatic brain injury, degloving of his scalp, and numerous lacerations. He received several surgeries over the course of the next few months and is making a full recovery. Travis Swanson's passing has left a hole in the hearts of many.

ANALYSIS

Negri, Hitchcock, and Swanson were very active and well-trained members of Gallatin County Search and Rescue. Negri's good decision-making, his knowledge of first aid, and his ability dig out Hitchcock were crucial in his partner's rescue. Although the route was well within their abilities, any travel in fourth-class terrain brings the risk of loose rock and includes areas of "no fall" terrain. Choose appropriate footwear, be vigilant for loose rock, and have the appropriate gear (helmet, harness) for any terrain you might encounter. (Source: Gallatin County Search and Rescue.)

Images

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