



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow, Stranded – Off Route on Descent

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Middle Teton

At approximately 7:45 p.m. on September , Teton Interagency Dispatch transferred a call to ranger R. Schuster from a distressed 28-year-old female climber. She explained that she'd taken a 30-foot fall on snow while descending the Middle Teton and now was stuck, surrounded by steep walls, and unable to move up or down.

The woman and her partner had left Lupine Meadows at 8 a.m. with a plan to climb the Middle Teton via the Southwest Couloir. They became separated somewhere in the upper South Fork of Garnet Canyon at about 10:30. The woman continued up the Southwest Couloir, hoping to meet her partner along the route however, unknown to her, the partner had descended into Garnet Canyon.

The woman summited the Middle Teton around 5 p.m. She was extremely anxious and nervous being alone on the summit and confused about the descent route. After a few unsuccessful attempts at descending, she committed to a route in a general southwest direction. During the descent, she got off route in steep, loose terrain and eventually slipped on snow, slightly injuring her hands. She stopped on a small, exposed ledge and called 911 to request help.

She was not able to report her location accurately, and cell phone coordinates were inconsistent and unreliable. At 9:15 p.m., rangers Ronczkowski and Pearson left Lupine Meadows trailhead to attempt to locate the stranded climber and assist her down. At 12:34 a.m., the rangers made voice contact with her from the upper South Fork of Garnet Canyon, but due to faint calls and echoing canyon walls, they found it difficult to locate her position. Finally, at 2:47 a.m., the rangers located the headlamp of the stranded climber high on the peak in the South Couloir (well to climber's right of the Southwest Couloir). They attempted to climb the couloir to reach to her but determined it to be too dangerous in the dark. They decided to climb the Southwest Couloir to the summit and attempt to downclimb to her location. At 4:41 a.m., they reached the summit and soon decided to rest there and wait for first light to continue.

Over the next several hours, the rangers attempted to descend to the stranded climber's position and another team of rangers attempted to reach her by helicopter. At 8:14 a.m., following a reconnaissance flight, ranger Johnson was short-hauled into the climber's location from the helicopter. However, soon after Johnson was on scene, rain and snow showers moved into the area, delaying any further flights.

By early afternoon, after several unsuccessful helicopter extraction attempts in very poor weather conditions, rescuers were in position to begin a technical raise of the patient toward the summit of the Middle Teton. The first raise of Johnson and the patient was completed at about 1:15 p.m.

A small break in the weather could be seen coming shortly after 2 p.m., so the team again prepared for a short-haul extraction. After one false start due to icing conditions, ranger Johnson and the patient were successfully extracted at about 3 p.m. and delivered to Lupine Meadows, where she was treated for hypothermia and dehydration. (Source: Grand Teton National Park Search and Rescue Report.)

ANALYSIS

Like the climber in the report above, this person was alone on the summit of Middle Teton and got confused about the descent. Teton rangers encourage climbers to stick together two heads are often better than one for route finding decisions. In addition, she had left the trailhead at 8 a.m. and reached the summit late in the afternoon during the relatively short days of September the pressure of oncoming nightfall may have contributed to her decision making. (Sources: Grand Teton National Park and the Editors.)

Images

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