



AAC Publications

Fall on Snow and Anchor Failure

Montana, Beartooth Mountains, Granite Peak

Granite Peak from the south. (A) Location of climber after fall from the Snowbridge, the saddle in the east ridge directly above. (B) Site of rappel anchor failure. (C) Position of fallen climber.

Two falls occurred on September 5 on the east ridge, the standard route up Granite Peak, one of them resulting in a fatality.

At about 2 p.m., Jay (22) slipped while crossing a narrow col known as the Snowbridge and slid 250 feet down a snow gully and into steep scree. He suffered several broken ribs, a broken collarbone, a small closed pneumothorax, and numerous lacerations and bruises.

Jay's partner, Jared (19), descended to Froze to Death Plateau to try to get cell phone service, and at the plateau encountered another party, who used their inReach to call for help. Meanwhile, Heather (23) and Miles (30), both EMTs and Big Sky ski patrollers, were descending from higher on the mountain when the incident occurred. They downclimbed to Jay and provided emergency care. At around 8 p.m., a Montana National Guard helicopter tried to insert a rescuer to the scene, but due to the wind, elevation, and coming nightfall, the flight was suspended. Jay, Miles, and Heather prepared to bivouac for the night.

At around 5 p.m. that same day, four climbers (three males in their 40s and one male in his 60s) were descending the east ridge after reaching the summit around 3:30 p.m. This group was experienced and equipped with a rope, a rock rack, food, water, cell phones, and warm clothes. The descent features two optional rappels of about 80 feet each. At their second rappel, the party chose to use an existing anchor with webbing around a boulder. Climber 1 was about 30 feet into the rappel when the entire boulder dislodged and fell down the face; he fell a short distance to a small ledge, where he was able to stop his fall, but suffered injuries to both ankles. Climber 2, who was standing below the boulder, waiting to rappel, was knocked off balance when the boulder came loose, and he fell approximately 1,000 feet.

Climber 3 and Climber 4 were able to downclimb to Climber 1 and recover the rope, which they used to move him to a more secure location. Climber 3 then used the rope to descend to Climber 2 and confirm he had died in the fall. The climbers were able to reach 911 by phone at 5:30 p.m. Climbers 1 and 4 bivouacked at their location, and Climber 3 bivouacked at the lower location with his deceased partner.

On September 6 at 7:10 a.m. the Gallatin County Search and Rescue helicopter inserted rescuers at both the upper and lower accident sites. By around 8:30 a.m., Climbers 1 through 4, Jay, Heather, and Miles all had been extricated to a staging area. By around 10 a.m., all parties involved were off the mountain.

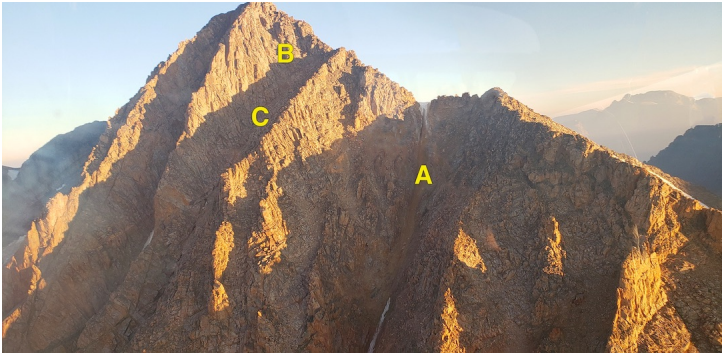
ANALYSIS

Although the east ridge route (a.k.a. east ridge to south face) is rated as 4th class, trip reports and guidebooks warn that route-finding can be difficult on the upper mountain, and the terrain is quite exposed in places—it is definitely not a “walkup.” Depending on the comfort level and experience of climbing parties, a rope and a light rock rack and slings can be useful to protect exposed sections and

reinforce rappel anchors. In late season, the Snowbridge is often melted out, but earlier in the year, an ice axe and crampons will make this passage more secure. Jay and Jared were inexperienced for a route of this difficulty and carried no technical equipment.

Fixed rappel anchors should always be carefully assessed and tested before trusting one's life to them. In this case, a firm test-push might have revealed the instability of the boulder and prevented the tragic incident. Note that the first person to reach a rappel anchor should inspect and test the anchor setup before clipping to the anchor; if necessary, this test should be performed while protected by a temporary anchor or while still clipped to the ropes from the previous rappel. See "Know the Ropes: Rappelling" (2012) for tips on setting up and assessing rappel anchors, and "Know the Ropes: Safer 4th Class" (2018) for ideas on moving safely and efficiently through such terrain; both articles are available at publications.americanalpineclub.org. (Sources: Gallatin County Search and Rescue and the Editors.)

Images



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