



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Shasta Annual Summary**

California, Mt. Shasta and Castle Crags Wilderness

**The number of accidents and searches on Mt. Shasta was down from the last couple of seasons, most likely due to COVID-19 and the associated forest closure and stay-at-home orders, which kept people off the mountain for a while.** In 2020, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) sold 4,633 summit passes, compared with the 20-year average of 6,467. In total, there were 12 search and rescue incidents on Mt. Shasta (not all involving climbing), while the average is 20 per year. Unfortunately, one of the accidents resulted in a fatality. Below are details of some of the incidents.

On Monday, March 2, a 50-year-old male climber contacted the USFS climbing rangers looking for assistance in recovering his tent and belongings from Lake Helen. He had been planning a solo, two-day winter climb of the Avalanche Gulch route, with a camp at Lake Helen, but cold and strong wind made for a challenging experience setting up his tent. He turned back and abandoned the majority of his gear, and he reported having severe frostbite on his fingers when he returned home. The climber's tent was recovered the next day, tangled in the rocks a few hundred feet below Lake Helen. Setting up a tent in difficult conditions is an often underestimated skill in winter mountaineering.

On June 14, a climber called 911 reporting severe right shoulder pain after a self-arrest attempt while glissading above Lake Helen. The climber had been descending after a successful summit with a partner and a guide. While glissading, she began going too fast and attempted to self-arrest, but the axe grabbed the snow in such a way that injured her shoulder. She attempted to hike down, but the pain was unbearable, and she called for help. The decision was made to evacuate her by helicopter.

Two falls in late June occurred in the same general location (circled) on Mt. Shasta's west face route. Late in the afternoon on June 21, rangers received information about an injured climber at 11,000 feet on the west face route. When rangers arrived on scene, an assessment revealed possible broken ribs and breathing complications on the right side of the chest. The reporting party stated the climber had fallen while downclimbing a 50° slope, losing control and colliding with a rock garden at the bottom. The climber was extracted via helicopter.

A week later, a 55-year-old climber also slipped and fell while descending the same general area on the west face. The climber had crampons on and an ice axe in his hand when he slipped and slid 400 feet, colliding with an exposed rock patch at the bottom of the snow slope. His partner stated that the man was speaking in German (he usually speaks English) and was alert and oriented only to his name. When rangers arrived, a head-to-toe assessment revealed facial trauma, black-and-blue eyes, and pain in the right shoulder and upper thoracic spine. The patient was wearing a helmet. Two nearby climbers hiked up to help, and one was instructed to hold C-spine. It was determined to be unsafe to carry the patient without a litter, so rangers hiked in a SKED litter from the helicopter landing zone in Hidden Valley. The patient was packaged in the SKED and carried down across rock and snow to the Hidden Valley camp, where he was loaded into a helicopter for transport to the hospital.

On July 5, a climber who had summited via the Avalanche Gulch route got off route during his descent and headed onto the Whitney Glacier. The 47-year-old was equipped with crampons and a single trekking pole. After the recent low-precipitation winters, the Whitney Glacier is a jumbled mess of rock, ice, and crevasses. The climber, now marooned on an island of rocks at about 13,000 feet, reported that "moving off the rock pile may cost him his life." Yet, while waiting for rescue, the climber decided to try and descend on his own, haphazardly glissading on a path that took him over a

crevasse and onto a snow bridge in another crevasse. During his fall, the climber injured his neck and nose. He climbed out of the crevasse and began to descend again, this time avoiding crevasses, before stopping near 11,000 feet. The helicopter and rescuers redirected after locating the climber's new position, and rangers arrived on scene at 8 p.m. and helped the climber to the landing zone at 10,400 feet.

On September 25, Chelsey Klein and Jeffrey Sutton started from the Northgate trailhead and set up camp two miles up the trail as the sun began to set. The next morning, they attempted to climb the Hotlum-Bolam Ridge. Approximately eight hours into their day, the pair decided to descend from a high point near 13,000 feet. In late afternoon, at about 12,000 feet, they realized they had deviated from their ascent route. They put on crampons, got out their ice axes, and attempted to traverse across the western reaches of the Hotlum Glacier to regain the lateral moraine. As they traversed, Sutton slipped and fell, tumbling a few hundred feet down the very icy slope. Conditions were such that self-arrest was impossible.

Klein called 911 and reported that Sutton was unconscious. After a few minutes he began to move and attempted to stand up, but then slipped a second time and fell out of view. Late that night, with assistance from California National Guard, Klein was rescued by helicopter. The crew returned to search for Sutton, but was unable to locate him. Two climbing rangers were inserted to 8,600 feet, and additional searchers began hiking from Northgate trailhead. At sunrise, rangers began searching the glacier and located Sutton, who was deceased.

Rangers' makeshift bivouac, with meager shelter from rockfall, during an extended rescue in the Trinity Chutes area.

On October 5, a 23-year-old climber slipped and fell from 12,500 feet in the middle of the Trinity Chutes in Avalanche Gulch. At this time of the year, the south side of the mountain was completely devoid of snow, and the Trinity Chutes is one of the most rockfall-prone portions of the mountain. The climber called 911 and reported a chief complaint of two broken ankles.

With little time left in the day, a helicopter crew inserted two rangers to Helen Lake. The plan was to move the climber to a safer location for the night, preparing for a hoist the following morning. Rangers arrived on scene and found multiple lacerations head to toe (no helmet), a severe open thumb injury, possible broken ribs and broken left ankle, and possible dislocated right ankle. Rangers moved the climber to a location away from the active rockfall, behind a moderate sized boulder on the 35° to 40° slope. It was now dark, and they determined it would be unsafe to haul the climber down the slope any further. The patient was covered in emergency blankets and warm garments, and the rangers took cover from the ongoing rockfall behind some small boulders.

In the early morning, California Highway Patrol's H-14 helicopter arrived on scene. There was pressure to get the patient to a lower elevation, as the CHP crew were not confident they could hoist the patient from this elevation. However, after stripping the helicopter of extraneous equipment and burning off fuel, they were able to conduct the hoist near maximum power. All rescue personnel made it off the mountain safely.

## **ANALYSIS**

The snowpack on Shasta was far below the historic average, which meant the safest climbing conditions were earlier in the spring than usual and didn't last long—especially since the USFS closed the mountain above 10,000 feet from April 23 to May 15 because of concerns related to the pandemic. When the closure lifted, Shasta received heavy visitation, and some climbers, despite warnings, gave the mountain a go all season long. As the snow melted out, there was a gradual increase in rockfall and icy snow surfaces, and slip-and-fall consequences were greatly exacerbated by falls that terminated into boulders.

As usual, there were a couple of searches for climbers who were unfamiliar with the terrain, separated

from their group, did not have navigation tools, and/or got lost in poor weather or limited visibility.

Mt. Shasta is often described as a “beginner” mountaineering objective, but the technical requirements should not be understated. Climbers looking to grow their mountaineering skills should strongly consider hiring a guide who can supervise the practice of new skills and add a margin of safety.

(Source: Mt. Shasta Climbing Ranger Report and 2020 Search and Rescue Incident Narratives.)

## Images



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Rangers' makeshift bivouac with meager shelter from rockfall during an extended rescue in the Trinity Chutes area.

## Article Details

Author	Mt. Shasta Climbing Ranger Report and 2020 Search and Rescue Incident Narratives
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	25
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports