



AAC Publications

Stranded — Avalanches

California, San Jacinto Mountain, North Face

The north face of San Jacinto Peak rises more than 9,000 feet above the desert floor. The Snow Creek route follows obvious gullies to the summit. Photo by Blake Douglas

On April 24, Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit (RMRU) received a call-out at 3:30 pm for two subjects who had been attempting the Snow Creek route on the north face of San Jacinto Peak. (This is one of the largest mountain escarpments in the Lower 48, rising more than 9,000 feet from the valley to the 10,839-foot summit.) Luckily, they had a cell signal and were able to report that they were okay but were stuck at about 7,000 feet, unable to move up or down due to extreme avalanche danger. It was over 100°F on the desert floor, and a heavy snowstorm had occurred in early April.

Rescuers responded by helicopter, dropping two team members on a rock outcropping 50 yards below the subjects. This area was safely out of the couloir on climber's right. The climbers were a bit shaken up but uninjured. One of them was without a pack and reported that an avalanche had taken it.

The helicopter crew returned and performed a hover step, and one of the subjects and a rescuer climbed aboard. While the other two were waiting for the helicopter to return, they witnessed a loose wet slide in the adjacent gully bed that lasted over 90 seconds. (A video of this avalanche can be seen at the Accidents website: publications.americanalpineclub.org.) The helicopter soon returned and retrieved the remaining subject and rescuer.

ANALYSIS

The two had started at midnight from the utility station on the desert floor and made it to 7,000 feet by the afternoon, when large loose wet avalanches started occurring. They escaped the couloir by climbing onto a rocky outcropping, but not before one of them was struck by a large block of snow. He had lost the equipment he carried except for his helmet, which had a broken strap as a result of the impact. They considered descending, but the wet slides continued and they did not feel comfortable down-climbing the huge chockstone (3rd/4th class) at 5,500 feet. These two made the right choice to stay where they were and call for help.

Snow Creek is on the tick list for more and more people. When attempting a route like this, it is imperative to have more than physical fitness and route-finding skills. Understanding the snow conditions is crucial for safely completing this route. Conditions may be favorable for only a few years each decade, and for only a few weeks in those years. In this case, the heavy snowfall earlier in the month was poised to slide and funnel into this drainage in the spring heat.

It is also worth noting that, when traveling in high-risk mountain terrain, brightly colored clothing greatly helps with being spotted if a rescue is needed. It took a while to find the subjects since they were wearing all dark clothing and blended in with the rocks and terrain. (Source: Tyler Shumway, Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit.)

Images



Helicopter returns to base below the north face of San Jacinto Peak, which rises more than 9,000 feet above the desert floor. The Snow Creek route follows obvious gullies to the summit.

Article Details

Author	Tyler Shumway, Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	39
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports