



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice — Inadequate Protection

Colorado, Telluride, Bridalveil Falls

On February 1, Michael Levy (31) suffered a broken fibula after taking a leader fall on the second pitch of Bridalveil Falls (3 pitches, WI5+) near Telluride. He and climbing partner Tom Bohanon (65) effected a self-rescue to the nearby access road before being transported by local SAR to their vehicle. Below is Levy's edited report:

We arrived at the trailhead at 3:45 a.m. The approach took approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. We left our skis below the snow-covered talus slope leading up to the climb. It was twilight when we began racking up, and it was still difficult to see much beyond the glow of our headlamps.

The first pitch was extremely wet, and the ice was poor quality. I made most of my upward progress by hooking my tools behind ice petals. I occasionally yelled down to Bo (who had climbed the route on six prior occasions) to ask which way I should go. Sixty meters up, I reached a sheltered ice cave and made an anchor with two ice screws in solid blue ice. I brought Bo up.

After sipping some tea and restacking the rope, I prepared to set off on pitch two. We had brought 15 ice screws, and I wanted as many of them as possible for the next 60-meter lead. Therefore, I removed the shorter of the two screws from the anchor, leaving the bomber 21cm screw. [The reconfigured anchor included Bohanon's two ice tools, planted above the single screw, all equalized with a cordelette, with the power point one foot below the screw. After a failed initial attempt on the next pitch, Levy retreated. He then chose a directpath toward the next belay.]

Not wanting to sacrifice any of my 14 screws, I decided against putting in a first screw as I normally would a short distance after leaving the belay. Two meters above the belay, a blob of ice beneath my left foot disintegrated. Both tools popped from their hook placements, and I fell approximately five meters. [This was a factor-two fall, past his belayer.]

My right foot was bent against the inside of my calf, the sole of my boot facing upward. Bo had been sucked up into the anchor. We decided the best course of action would be for Bo to lower me to the ground with his Grigri and then rappel from a V-thread. I removed my right crampon so that it wouldn't catch on the ice as I lowered.

When I got to the ground, I butt-scotched to our packs. I called San Miguel County Search and Rescue. They explained that if I could get to my skis (500 feet below) on the access road, the rescue would be straightforward.

I crawled and butt-scotched to the road while Bo rigged his rappel. SAR arrived 45 minutes later with snowmobiles and a litter. Once back at the trailhead, Bo and I drove to Telluride Medical Center, where the doctor confirmed a broken fibula.

ANALYSIS

Given a WI5+ grade, Bridalveil was at the time in extra challenging conditions. Levy believes his accident was the combination of several bad decisions and bad luck.

First, the ice was in poor condition, triggering the fall. Second, the scale of the route and its maze of ice daggers, cauliflowers, and mushrooms led to route-finding difficulties and the choice of the ill-fated line.

He also failed to place adequate protection when it was readily available. There are two situations while leading water ice when it is essential to stop and place an ice screw. One is very soon after leaving the belay, and the other is prior to clearing a bulge.

Levy's decision to forgo placing a screw above the anchor was, in his own words, "foolish." The factor-two fall onto a one-screw anchor (ice axes are inadequate as anchors) could have been easily avoided. "I knew I should place a screw above the belay but was intent on conserving my supply. Thankfully the anchor held up, but it was an unnecessary risk." (Sources: Michael Levy and Tom Bohanon.)

Images



Rescuers attend to Michael Levy after a leg-breaking fall off Bridalveil Falls (back).



View from the litter. Bridalveil Falls in the background.

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