



AAC Publications

FATAL FALL NEAR DENALI PASS—Climbing Alone

Alaska, Denali National Park, Denali, West Buttress Route

On May 3, a 35-year-old male climbing solo on the West Buttress route was reported missing. The climber had departed Kahiltna Base Camp on April 27 for a ten-day solo attempt on Denali (20,310'). He was the first climber of the season on the West Buttress. During his trip, there were no other climbing parties in his proximity nor any of the National Park Service (NPS) infrastructure installed for the season. This route is typically well-traveled and wanded during the busy climbing season, starting approximately one or two weeks later.

A concerned friend contacted the Denali mountaineering rangers and relayed that he had not received a prearranged 12-hour check-in from the climber since April 30. On that day, at 2 p.m., the climber had contacted this friend via satellite phone and indicated he was just below Denali Pass at approximately 18,000 feet.

He also reported that he had attempted a summit climb but had turned around at 19,000 feet due to weather. The reporting party (RP) noted that the climber sounded tired but not in trouble. The RP advised the climber to continue his descent due to a deteriorating weather forecast.

On May 4, the NPS helicopter completed a reconnaissance flight from Talkeetna with the contract pilot and two mountaineering rangers. The search team located a red tent at 13,900 feet, well below the typical 14,200-foot camp. Fresh snow from a storm during the previous two days showed no evidence of activity in the vicinity of the tent. Weather conditions prevented landing at the tent site or any aerial searching higher on the mountain.

The next day, a helicopter search team returned and was able to land and confirm the solo climber had not returned to his tent. A pair of skis was located higher up the mountain, at approximately 15,000 feet, just below the fixed lines on the West Buttress. Weather conditions again prevented search efforts above this elevation.

On May 6, the deceased climber was located from the helicopter at approximately 17,000 feet and on a direct fall line from Denali Pass. Flat light in the basin, technical terrain, and the lack of acclimatized rangers at the time of this discovery paused recovery efforts until those conditions could be mitigated. On May 17, two acclimatized mountaineering rangers were flown from the 14,200-foot camp to the 17,200-foot camp to recover the climber.

ANALYSIS

Denali Pass is possibly the most dangerous section of the West Buttress route. Historically, it has seen more than 20 fatalities. Most of these accidents have occurred while descending from higher on the mountain. Fatigued climbers traversing to high camp from Denali Pass at 18,200 feet often underestimate the seriousness of the terrain (which rarely exceeds 40°). Using a climbing rope and the fixed protection maintained by mountain guides and NPS rangers along the traverse will typically mitigate the hazards. Climbers who fall without these protections in place will likely find it impossible to self-arrest on the 1,000-foot icy slope below.

The rangers can only speculate as to the exact causes of this climbing fall, but fatigue from a summit attempt almost certainly contributed. This unfortunate incident also illustrates the additional hazards

of an early-season climb attempted alone. Even at the height of the climbing season, with other climbers on route but still lacking the resources of a climbing team, solo climbers have far fewer self-rescue options should they become ill or injured. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images

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