



AAC Publications

MULTIPLE CLIMBING FALLS

Alaska, Denali National Park, Denali, West Buttress Route

On June 11 at 9:45 p.m., NPS rangers received an SOS activation near 19,500 feet. It was reported that a 49-year-old male climber had fallen from the summit ridge and had sustained a head injury. The injured climber stated that he was unable to descend and was requesting assistance. The climber did not have a medical kit or any additional survival gear.

The mountaineering rangers at 14,200 feet were able to contact a guided team in the area via hand-held radio. This guided team graciously provided the injured climber with a bivouac sack, a shovel, and a stove so that he could safely remain in place until the requested help arrived on scene.

Weather conditions at the time prevented the NPS helicopter from launching in Talkeetna. When provided with this information, the team with the injured climber decided to continue their descent. At 1:31 a.m. on June 12, NPS personnel received another SOS message confirming that the team was descending. While descending below Denali Pass, the injured climber fell again. Subsequently, while tracking the team's emergency satellite device from Talkeetna, NPS personnel noticed a significant altitude decrease at 5:52 a.m.

NPS rangers at 17,200-foot camp were notified that the patient had possibly fallen again. A rescue team departed camp and was able to visually locate the fallen climber across the basin. The patient had stopped at approximately 17,500 feet after falling from the Denali Pass traverse. The ranger team continued to the patient's location, packaged him for a technical lowering operation, and was able to descend to a suitable helicopter landing zone (LZ) on the Upper Peters Glacier at 17,000 feet. The NPS helicopter departed Talkeetna later that day, once the weather improved, and was able to extract the climber to a waiting ambulance.

ANALYSIS

All climbers embarking on a Denali expedition are advised to be prepared to self-rescue an injured or ill teammate. This is especially true higher on the mountain and on summit attempts, where rescue resources are limited and logistics are challenging.

At a minimum, teams should carry medical kits with altitude medications and a bivouac kit that includes at least a sleeping bag, a steel shovel, a stove, and emergency communication device(s). Unfortunately, the climbers involved in this accident were not prepared and had to rely on other climbers for their survival. This predicament depletes the resources and reduces the safety margin of other teams on the mountain. A simple injury or illness at extreme altitude can result in significant complications or death when teams are unprepared. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images

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