



AAC Publications

FATAL CREVASSE FALL

Alaska, Denali National Park, Kahiltna Glacier, Southeast Fork

On May 17 at 9 p.m., one member of a three-person climbing team fell into a crevasse on the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, at around 8,400 feet, below the North Buttress of Mt. Hunter. The team was on skis and unroped at the time of the fall. After a snow bridge collapsed within the crevasse, the fall further resulted in a full snow burial and the death of the 51-year-old male climber.

One of the teammates descended to Denali base camp and made contact with NPS rangers at 11 p.m. The rangers were informed that the team had tried unsuccessfully to access the crevasse and make contact with the presumed deceased climber.

Due to the lack of daylight, the NPS helicopter was unable to fly until the following morning. Two mountaineering rangers departed camp with the responding party at approximately 1 a.m., and the team arrived at the accident scene at about 3:15 a.m. The climber who remained on scene had been unable to make contact with the climber in the crevasse despite repeated attempts.

One ranger was lowered into the crevasse and confirmed that the buried climber, who had been under snow for several hours, showed no signs of life. Following this confirmation, the decision was made to execute a recovery operation during daylight hours, when more resources could be utilized and conditions were more favorable. The deceased climber was recovered on May 19.

ANALYSIS

Tragically, this marks the second year in a row that NPS rangers have recovered a deceased skier from an unroped crevasse fall. There are many simple techniques for traveling in crevassed terrain that greatly increases the margin of safety. On flat glaciers, the most trusted technique is roping up with climbing partners. This risk-mitigation strategy can mean the difference between hauling up an uninjured teammate after a crevasse fall and the unnecessary body recovery of a climbing partner.

While skis may distribute weight over a wider surface area, it is inconclusive as to whether they actually create a safety buffer in glaciated terrain. The crevasses in the Alaska Range are wide enough to well exceed the width of typical touring skis, and there may be few to no surface clues to delineate a large crevasse. When choosing to ski unroped on a glacier, it is imperative to survey the terrain and make certain not to expose a team to unnecessary crevasse fall hazard. (Source: Denali Mountaineering Rangers.)

Images



Mt. Hunter with Kahiltna Base Camp and the air-taxi landing zone clearly visible on the heavily crevassed glacier. In May 2022, an unroped climber on skis fell into a crevasse beneath the prominent shaded North Buttress on the left side of the mountain.

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