



AAC Publications

FALL ON SNOW – Avalanche

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Icefields Parkway

On March 22, a party of two was climbing Polar Circus (9 pitches, WI5), located above the Icefields Parkway in the Canadian Rockies. At approximately 4 p.m., while descending snow slopes between ice pitches, the party was struck by a Size 2 avalanche that originated from one of the side walls above the climb. Both climbers were caught and carried down a 25-meter (82') Grade III ice pitch. Neither person was buried, but one of the climbers sustained a broken leg and was unable to move.

The climbers were able to communicate the accident details to a friend at the base, who in turn reported the accident to a mountain guide at the nearby Rampart Creek Youth Hostel. The guide contacted Parks Canada via VHF radio, and a helicopter with a Parks Canada rescue team was dispatched.

At approximately 6:30 p.m., the rescue team located the two subjects sitting on fresh avalanche debris below a feature on the route known as the Pencil. The two climbers were evacuated using a helicopter long-line. Due to continuing overhead avalanche hazard, the rescuer spent minimal time on scene and focused on getting the party down to the highway, where they were passed on to a waiting ambulance.

ANALYSIS

Polar Circus is exposed to considerable avalanche hazard from large slopes above, as well as from the steep walls of the gully in which the climb is located. The hazard is further complicated by the fact that it is difficult to complete the route before the southwest-facing slopes above the climb become affected by the sun. Climbers must be very confident that the avalanche hazard is reasonable and that the day will stay cool before attempting this route.

Analysis of the start zone indicated that this avalanche was caused by rockfall from the gully side wall impacting the snow slope and entraining loose, wet snow during a warm afternoon. Although rockfalls can happen at any time, they are more common during warm periods. Additionally, the warm temperature allowed the soft surface snow to be entrained and created the avalanche.

The public avalanche bulletin for Banff National Park on March 22 rated the hazard “considerable” at all elevations, with the wind increasing to strong as freezing levels rose to near 2,500 meters. (“Considerable” means dangerous avalanche conditions, with natural avalanches possible and human-triggered avalanches likely). It is unknown why the climbers attempted the route, given the poor weather forecast and hazard rating. Several personal factors may have influenced the party’s decision: Their motivation was high to climb this route, and this was combined with the knowledge that, as visiting climbers, they might not have another opportunity to attempt the route before returning home.

(Source: Parks Canada.)

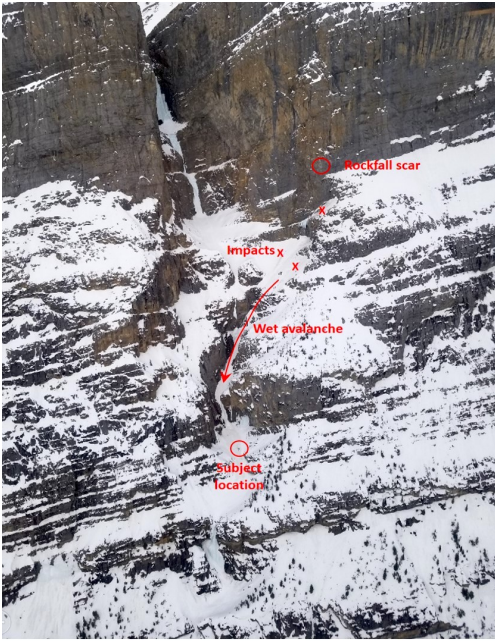
Images



Detail of the sites where rockfall impacted the snow adjacent to the Polar Circus ice climb and triggered a loose, wet avalanche.



Location of the climbers impacted by an avalanche on the Polar Circus route.



Annotated overview of the avalanche incident on March 22 on the Polar Circus ice route.

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