



AAC Publications

FATAL SLIP ON ROCK – Climbing Unroped

Canada, British Columbia, Assiniboine Provincial Park

On August 12, a party of two climbers left the Hind Hut to ascend the north ridge of Mt. Assiniboine (AD 5.5). By late morning, they had reached one of the steeper upper steps at about 3,500 meters (11,482'). The pair had soloed everything up to this point and arrived several minutes apart. The first climber to arrive (Climber 1) assessed the next step and determined they would likely use a rope due to the steep angle and sloping nature of some of the holds. When Climber 2 arrived, the pair took a break and considered their options. Meanwhile, a separate party downclimbed the step. This party was unroped.

After watching the other party downclimb, Climber 2 decided he would try soloing the step and started up the pitch while Climber 1 packed the rope. As Climber 2 started up, Climber 1 watched him grab a sloping hold, slip, and fall down the north face. He fell out of sight. Climber 1 tried to gain a better vantage point by carefully climbing to the top of the rock step but was not able to see his partner. He then triggered an SOS on his satellite communication device. At the top of the step, he met a guided group on their way down. The guide radioed for assistance and helped Climber 1 down to a flat ledge. After communicating with the rescue team, it was determined that the guided group would remain with Climber 1 and wait for a rescue.

A team arrived by helicopter approximately one hour later and located Climber 1 and the guided group. Two other guided parties were located near the summit, and the deceased, fallen climber was located at approximately 3,300 meters (10,826'). After surveying the scene, it was determined that all the parties would be removed prior to accessing the fallen climber, in order to minimize rockfall hazard to the rescuers below. All climbers were flown or slung down to the Hind Hut, and the fallen climber was then accessed and slung down to the hut as well.

ANALYSIS

The north ridge of Mt. Assiniboine is often soloed due to its low technical difficulty. However, it requires a great deal of care and experience to climb safely. The route is very exposed, and a route-finding mistake can quickly elevate the technical grade. Loose, sloping, or slippery rock is common. While the route was dry on this day, snow, ice, or verglas are common in the upper sections.

While we cannot know with certainty why Climber 2 decided to solo the steep step, prior to the ascent he had expressed interest in climbing the route unroped. His decision may have been influenced by watching the other unroped party. Fatigue and limited technical rock-climbing experience may have also played a part. Whatever influenced his decision, this incident highlights the risks involved in soloing exposed terrain. Easy terrain can prove fatal.

Communications during this incident were very good, in large part due to the guided parties (who had radios) and a satellite communication device. The rescue team was able to coordinate the pickup of the three groups, thereby eliminating the potential for human-generated rockfall during the recovery.

It is not always possible to remove other climbing parties from an accident scene. If you find yourself in a situation where a rescue is occurring nearby or below you, it is very important to remain stationary or move with extreme care to prevent rockfall hazard. (Source: Parks Canada.)

Images



An uninjured climber who lost his partner to a fatal fall waits for rescue below the steep upper step on the North Ridge of Mt. Assiniboine.



Mt. Assiniboine from the north showing the approximate fall line when an unroped climber slipped in August.

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