



AAC Publications

STRANDED – White-Out

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, East Prong

At about 7:30 p.m. on March 31, Jenny Lake rangers received a cell phone call from a solo backcountry skier. The skier said he was on top of the East Prong (just east of Mt. Owen) and could not continue due to white-out conditions and the technical nature of the terrain.

The skier reported that he had dug a snow cave and planned to spend the night in it. The weather was forecasted to improve the following morning, and he hoped he could make his way down once the visibility improved. The skier said he had 75 percent battery power left on his cell phone. Rangers told the skier that he had a good plan, that he should conserve his phone battery overnight, and that he should recontact rangers in the morning.

At about 6:30 the following morning, the skier texted and stated that he was okay and that the visibility had improved. However, at about 7 a.m., he called and said that, although he had climbed the East Prong the previous afternoon, he was unable to safely descend the technical terrain without a rope. He also reported that his original plan of continuing east along the ridgeline toward Teewinot Mountain was not feasible because the ridge was too corniced and technical. The skier added that over a foot of new snow had fallen overnight, increasing the avalanche hazard.

Rangers determined that the safest way to access and evacuate the stranded skier was via helicopter short-haul. The Teton County SAR helicopter, with pilot Steve Wilson, conducted a reconnaissance of the East Prong with a spotter and one ranger onboard. They confirmed that conditions were appropriate for a short-haul evacuation. A single ranger was short-hauled from Lupine Meadows to the top of the East Prong, and the two then were short-hauled back to the Lupine Meadows Rescue Cache. There, the skier declined any medical evaluation or care.

ANALYSIS

In an interview, the skier reported that he had departed the Taggart Lake trailhead the previous day during the late morning hours. He said he had skied up Garnet Canyon and ascended to Red Sentinel. He then descended the Red Sentinel Couloir into Glacier Gulch. He had originally planned to ascend the southeast aspect of Teewinot Mountain and then ski down the southeast couloir. However, the skier said that he changed his plan and decided to ascend the Koven Couloir and then East Prong before he became stranded.

This was an ambitious outing, and an earlier start and closer attention to the weather forecast might have avoided the need for an unplanned night out and a rescue. The skier did well to call for help when he realized he couldn't proceed safely and to prepare a snow cave for a successful emergency bivouac. (Sources: Grand Teton National Park and the Editors.)

Images

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