



AAC Publications

STRANDED – Misjudged Snow Conditions

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Mt. Walker

On April 12, Parks Canada visitor safety responded to an SOS activation on the north face of Mt. Walker (3,303m/10,837') above the Freshfield Icefield. A group of four ski mountaineers had camped and skied in the area for several days. On the 12th, the skiers climbed the east-southeast ridge of Walker using a ramp system of glacial ice and rock. Their plan was to ski the steep (about 35°) north face, which they had assessed to be in good condition the day before. It was a clear and warm spring day, with light wind.

The first skier on the slope was belayed for the first 30 meters. They made several turns, working down the face, and determined it was in good condition. They then unclipped from the rope to ski the line but soon encountered thinly covered glacier ice. They lost their balance and slid on the ice for 20 to 30 meters before self-arresting. During the slide, they initiated a small avalanche that revealed two to four centimeters of loose, dry snow covering the underlying ice on the slope below.

The skier was able to get back onto their skis and traverse to a rock rib. They had boot crampons and an ice axe but opted to keep descending on skis adjacent to the rock rib, as the snow there appeared to be thicker. They thought about ascending, but they were not comfortable with the risks of climbing back up.

As the skier sideslipped down, the snow thinned out. Fearful of falling, they placed an ice screw, clipped in a 30-meter rope, and belayed themselves down with the hopes of finding better snow. Unfortunately, the bare ice continued. Upon reaching the end of their rope, they were out of options, and it became clear they needed a rescue.

The group was equipped with radios and satellite communicators. They activated an SOS on a Garmin inReach. The visitor safety team from Banff National Park was notified, and a team of three flew to the area by helicopter.

The stranded skier was at an altitude of 3,100 meters, halfway down the north face of Walker. Two rescuers, equipped for ice climbing, slung in to the anchor point of the skier's rope. They built a new anchor, secured the stranded skier on a separate rope, and then conducted an anchor-release helicopter sling-rescue, evacuating both the skier and themselves to the staging area below.

ANALYSIS

The team misjudged the skiing conditions. When the first skier encountered ice thinly covered with snow, ascending was deemed riskier than descending farther. The first skier prudently elected to remain in place to avoid a more serious mishap. Fortunately, the team had the appropriate communication equipment to summon assistance. (Source: Parks Canada.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Parks Canada
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	76
Page	118
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Accident reports