



AAC Publications

Avalanche — Fatal Climbing Fall

Alaska, Ruth Gorge, Mooses Tooth

The West Ridge of the Mooses Tooth is a long snow and ice route featuring ice up to 60° and long expanses of steep snow. The snow section marked above was the site of an avalanche that caused the death of two climbers in May 2023.

Photo by Brian Sterling.

On May 7, Eli Michel (34) and Nafiun Awal (32) were reported overdue to NPS personnel in Talkeetna, Alaska. The team had been camping in the Ruth Gorge with a primary climbing objective of the West Ridge of the Mooses Tooth (10,335 feet). The West Ridge (5,200 feet, 60°) is a classic mountaineering route that has fallen out of favor in recent years due to the increased popularity of more direct and technical lines to the summit, including Ham and Eggs and Shaken, Not Stirred. Throughout their trip, the climbers had been checking in daily with a friend. Their final communication was on May 5 and stated that they were departing on the climb.

Following the overdue notification on May 7, NPS personnel were able to conduct a helicopter reconnaissance. After locating the overdue climbers' camp, the personnel onboard the aircraft were able to clearly identify and follow the climbers' approach and ascent track up the West Ridge.

The team had cached skis and other gear on the ridge at the point where the climbing became more technical and a transition to crampons was required. The final observed tracks ascended the ridge at approximately 9,200 feet. These tracks terminated at the crown of a small avalanche in terrain with slope angles less than 50°. Below the avalanche crown, the terrain is comprised of 3,000 feet of complex and crevassed alpine features. Both aerial and ground searches continued for 12 days after the initial report. Unfortunately, these searches only yielded sightings of scattered gear. NPS personnel concluded the fall and the exposure were not survivable, and rescue efforts ultimately were terminated.

ANALYSIS

Many details surrounding this accident remain unknown. It is unclear whether the climbers were roped together or utilizing running protection. A small avalanche with significant exposure to steep terrain can have tragic consequences. This is true even in circumstances where the slide originates in benign terrain. Even for a competent and experienced team such as these climbers, isolated pockets of wind slab or storm slab can be difficult to predict. Climbers must be attentive to the terrain they are traveling in as well as the consequences of falling into the terrain below.

This incident also highlights the benefits of carrying and communicating via two-way satellite devices on climbing expeditions. This team had scheduled check-ins with a reliable friend. This strategy allowed for efficient notification of emergency personnel and led to a timely resolution of the incident. (Sources: Denali Mountaineering Rangers and the AP.)

Images



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