



AAC Publications

Unplanned Bivouac — Lost, Separated From Party

California, Mt. Shasta, Whitney Glacier

Mt. Shasta (14,179 feet) from the north. In May, a climber became separated from his party at the summit and mistakenly descended onto the Whitney Glacier—seen here as the ice flowing below the col between the two highest peaks. Photo: Frank Schulenburg | Wikimed

In near whiteout conditions on the afternoon of May 5, Adam Danielson (51) of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, separated from his party at the summit of Mt. Shasta at 2:45 p.m. Though he and his party had climbed Avalanche Gulch—a route that ascends the south side of the mountain—Danielson mistakenly descended to the north onto the Whitney Glacier. The remainder of his party, who were on skis, safely descended to their previous night's camp at Helen Lake. Danielson never arrived.

The weather during this period was winter-like, with rain, snow, wind, and very cold temperatures. Danielson didn't have reliable navigation tools, nor overnight equipment. He was equipped with a small pack, water, a bit of food, an ice axe, crampons, a helmet, snowshoes, and a cell phone. Danielson realized he was lost when he encountered glaciated terrain and large crevasses. He called 911 and began direct communication with the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office and USFS climbing ranger Nick Meyers.

Cellular service was good at his location, and Danielson had an extra battery pack for his phone. Meyers told him that, regardless of any rescue plan, he was looking at an open overnight bivy. It would take rescuers four to six hours to get to his location by foot. Meyers suggested that Danielson descend if he could stay off the glacier, because a lower elevation would offer better protection from the weather. However, Danielson soon encountered a large crevasse and was afraid to move further. He was advised to shelter in place and that a rescue would launch in the morning.

At 5:30 a.m., continued poor weather prevented a helicopter rescue. Climbing rangers launched a ground rescue via the Northgate trailhead on snowmobile and skis. Siskiyou County SAR supported them with a snowcat and communications. Contact was made with Danielson at 12:30 p.m. at 11,600 feet on the Whitney Glacier. He was ambulatory, with a minor cold injury, and was escorted out to the Northgate trailhead by 4 p.m.; the sheriff's office then transported him several miles via snowcat to parked vehicles.

ANALYSIS

Danielson was humble and appreciative of the rescue efforts. Here are some take-home points:

- Check the weather before you climb and monitor conditions as you climb. Flexibility is one of the most important mountain skills. Be willing to change plans.
- Check your summit fever at the door. Don't summit late in the day.
- Carry navigation tools: map, compass, GPS, extra batteries or battery pack, etc. Know how to use them.
- Don't separate from your party. Make sure everyone is using the same mode of travel. In this case, Danielson was on foot and the rest of his party was on skis.

- Play the “what if” game: If things don’t go as planned, what are you going to do? Often incidents don’t involve injury but could involve environmental hazards like severe weather or an unplanned bivy. A small pad, bivy sack or tarp, and an extra down jacket can make a difference. (Source: Mt. Shasta Climbing Rangers.)

Images



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Mt. Shasta climbing rangers ski onto the Whitney Glacier to rescue a stranded climber.

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