



AAC Publications

Rockfall

California, Mt. Shasta, Avalanche Gulch

Mt. Shasta is a breathtaking and often crowded experience, with a fair share of avalanches and rockfall. Photo: Jack Dolan

On May 26, over the Memorial Day weekend, shortly before 9:15 a.m., a solo male climber (51) descending Avalanche Gulch was struck by a fist-sized rock near 11,500 feet. The rock originated from the Red Banks or Trinity Chutes. The rock impacted the right side of the climber's helmet, penetrating one of the vents. This delivered a laceration and minor skull fracture, in addition to a concussion.

At the time of the incident, climbing ranger Hayden MacArthur was several hundred feet above the individual and witnessed the event. Following impact, the climber fell and slid a hundred feet on a firm snow surface. A climber in a separate group applied a compression bandage to stop the bleeding.

Upon MacArthur's arrival, the patient was mostly alert, but had trouble recalling the event. He also had trouble recalling his spouse's name when requesting she be notified of the accident. Initially the patient felt confident he could descend, but upon getting to his feet, he could not support his weight. While the patient remained alert, his overall energy level and mental stamina were decreasing, and he developed a severe headache and nausea.

Given the symptoms of possible traumatic brain injury (TBI) and the favorable flying conditions, a decision was made to evacuate by helicopter. The patient began to show signs of cold-related injury, and insulation and layers were provided. The helicopter arrived at 11 a.m. for delivery to Mercy Medical Center.

ANALYSIS

This climber was prudent to wear a helmet; however, as we see in this case, a helmet can't always protect against a fast-moving rock. Avalanche Gulch has the highest exposure to rockfall on Mt. Shasta, but one can minimize the risk by climbing earlier in the season and early in the day. (Source: Mt. Shasta Climbing Rangers.)

Images



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