



AAC Publications

Hypothermia

California, Mt. Shasta, Avalanche Gulch

On June 2, an early-to-mid-20s climber descending Avalanche Gulch returned to Helen Lake (10,400 feet) with symptoms of mild hypothermia. Climbing rangers Eric Falconer and Hayden MacArthur were notified of the individual's condition by his two climbing partners and responded to provide support. Primary symptoms included shivering and intense physical and mental discomfort. Temperatures had been cold on the upper mountain, with strong wind out of the west and intermittent rain.

The soaking wet climber was found in his tent and sleeping bag at Helen Lake, still in his wet layers. These were removed and he was bundled with dry sleeping bags. Minor abrasions sustained from sliding on firm snow surfaces were bandaged. Hot-water bottles were inserted into his sleeping bag, and the climber was encouraged to eat and drink. Rangers took shifts lying adjacent to the individual as an additional source of heat. Symptoms gradually improved over the course of several hours. The patient and his partners began to descend sometime after 3 p.m. and successfully self-evacuated around 5 p.m.

ANALYSIS

Environmental factors contributing to this case included cold temperatures, strong wind, and intermittent precipitation. Human factors included poor equipment choices and poor general knowledge regarding safe recreation in a mountain environment. The climber lacked a durable hard shell clothing layer, and he chose microspike-style traction devices in place of crampons. The latter decision likely contributed to the slips and falls that saturated his clothing. Other observations included an overall lack of dry clothing to provide insulation and retain body heat. The primary contributing factor to this incident was the lack of adequate trip preparation for the conditions. (Source: Mt. Shasta Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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