



AAC Publications

Multiple Falls — Icy Conditions, Long Sliding Falls

New Hampshire, Mt. Washington, Tuckerman Ravine

At 2:30 p.m. on March 9, a party of two ascended Left Gully with the intention of skiing one of the runs in Tuckerman Ravine. The party traveled on foot across the top of the ravine toward an area above the Lip, a feature near the top of the cirque. At that point, both skiers slipped on the icy surface. They fell approximately 600 vertical feet to the bottom of the ravine, resulting in one fatality (Patient 1, female, 20) and life-threatening injuries to the other (Patient 2).

Mt. Washington Avalanche Center (MWAC) snow rangers and Mt. Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol (MWVSP), along with willing bystanders, effected a rescue and recovery.

Around the same time, a third person (Patient 3) fell from the upper reaches of Hillman's Highway (on an adjacent slope), sustaining critical injuries.

At 2:40 p.m., MWAC and MWVSP rescuers arrived on scene. A helicopter request was denied due to fog and low clouds. Rescuers began the extrication of Patients 1 and 2 in rescue litters down the Tuckerman Ravine Trail. This took one hour and involved two separate teams of rescuers and bystanders who belayed the litters down sections of steep and icy terrain. Patient 2 was eventually transported to Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, where an ambulance was waiting.

At 4 p.m., the rescue team transitioned efforts to Patient 3, and by 6 p.m., Patient 3 was transferred to a snowcat and transported to Pinkham Notch Visitor Center. All rescue efforts were completed by 10 p.m.

ANALYSIS

Recent thawing and refreezing had made Tuckerman Ravine icy and deadly. Over the week prior to the accidents, the Presidential Range saw several days of above-freezing temperatures and rain. This resulted in a loss of 12 inches to the snowpack on the summit of Mt. Washington and at ravine level. Almost two inches of rain fell throughout the week, and on March 6, Mt. Washington Observatory set a high temperature record for the day (40°F).

Temperatures dropped below freezing on March 7, and the snowpack refroze over the next several days. On the day of these accidents, the summit of Mt. Washington recorded an average temperature of 24°F. The snowpack was firm with decreased coverage, exposed rocks, deep holes, and ice throughout Tuckerman Ravine. The avalanche hazard was low, but slide-for-life conditions were very serious.

Dramatic and unpredictable weather on Mt. Washington creates notoriously dangerous conditions. Although hypothermia and avalanches kill many people, the majority of fatalities during the winter are due to long sliding falls. (See mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org/danger-zones-mt-washington-by-dougald-macdonald/.) Here, sliding falls make up 42 percent of fatalities. Prior to March 9, several long, sliding falls occurred that did not result in serious injury.

Conditions impact the ravine differently at different elevations. Soft, edgeable snow at the beginning

of an ascent rapidly transitions to firm snow or ice that is impenetrable by ski edges and ice axes. The higher the terrain, the more serious the consequences. (Sources: Mt. Washington Avalanche Center and the Editors.)

Images

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