



AAC Publications

Fatal Glissade — Failed Self-Arrest, Inadequate Equipment

California, Sierra Nevada, Mt. Whitney, Main Trail

On November 11, Joseph Brambila (21) summited Mt. Whitney via the Main Trail and descended safely to Trail Crest (13,625 feet). It was his fifth attempt and first successful summit since June 2025. There he met Luis Buenrostro, a solo hiker and one of the last people to see Brambila alive. The temperature was dropping and the sun setting; Brambila indicated he intended to take a shortcut by glissading down the broad slope on the climber's right of the 99 Switchbacks—a 30°–35° northeast-facing slope with 1,300 vertical feet of relief (see p.53.).

Buenrostro observed that Brambila carried a gardening hatchet, a short-handled chopping tool useless for self-arrest. Buenrostro was concerned but did not intervene. He told the Los Angeles Times: "He said he was gonna be good, so I thought, he's gonna be good." The slope held sparse snow—largely ice-adjacent névé interspersed with talus. Out of Buenrostro's sight, Brambila began his glissade, lost control, and failed to self-arrest. His body was photographed by another hiker the following day and the Inyo County Sheriff's Office received a report of a deceased individual on the slope.

A major storm cycle from November 15 to 23 deposited 73 inches of snow above 10,000 feet, burying Brambila's body. Recovery was complicated by remote terrain, technical access, and continued storm. The photos allowed the Whitney community and SAR agencies to triangulate the location. Without them, a recovery before the spring melt-out would likely have been impossible. On December 15, following helicopter-assisted ground operations using ground-penetrating radar, avalanche search dogs, beacons, and RECCO detectors, Brambila's body was recovered.

ANALYSIS

The Slope to the Climber's Right of the 99 Switchbacks is a preferred glissade descent in spring. November is not spring. On November 11 the snow was sparse, hard, and interspersed with exposed talus.

Brambila had glissaded this same slope in June 2025 on soft snow and documented it on YouTube, acknowledging afterward that he hadn't known how it would turn out. That experience appears to have shaped his confidence in November.

A gardening hatchet cannot substitute for an ice axe in self-arrest—the pick geometry, shaft length, and head weight are wrong, and a climber who hasn't practiced the technique with a proper axe is unlikely to execute it under pressure. Buenrostro's hesitation is a recognizable dynamic, but when a more experienced person identifies a hazard, a brief word can matter. (Sources: Inyo County Sheriff's Office, Los Angeles Times, and Brandon Riza.)

Images

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