Climber Struck By Falling Ice — Poor Position, Summited Late in the Day

Canada, Alberta, Banff National Park, Icefields Parkway, Murchison Falls

On March 2, two experienced climbers set out to climb Murchison Falls (III WI4/5) along the Icefields Parkway. They left the parking area around 7 a.m. in temperatures of 16°F/-9°C, with a forecasted high of 36°F/2°C. Sun was expected later in the day. Their plan was to complete the route and descend before the sun hit the face.

Delays caused by other parties above caused the climbers to top out as the sun reached the climb. On their first rappel, the ropes twisted and jammed in the rings; one climber had to ascend 20 meters to free the ropes, adding over an hour to their descent.

While the climbers were setting up the second rappel, a large piece of ice released from above—likely freed by solar warming—struck near the anchor, rebounded, and hit one climber in the face. That climber was briefly knocked unconscious and sustained multiple facial fractures and lacerations. Upon regaining consciousness, the climber, at 4:42 p.m., triggered an SOS via Garmin inReach.

Parks Canada Dispatch received the signal at 4:45 p.m., and by 5:22 p.m., a helicopter was en route. The team located the party at 6:01 p.m., and the helicopter slung the patient to EMS staging on the highway by 6:12 p.m. The climber had facial fractures, lacerations, and mild hypothermia.

ANALYSIS

This incident turned on timing. The team started early and planned to be off the route before solar warming released any ice. While this was a strategically sound approach, delays from other parties erased that margin and left them exposed at exactly the wrong moment. The jammed rappel rope added additional exposure time. On routes with afternoon sun hazard, build in time for the delays you cannot predict.

The outcome was largely determined by what the team did right. The injured climber's partner had recently practiced lowering with a Munter hitch and backup prusik—an unusual but directly applicable skill that allowed them to safely descend. Both climbers carried first-aid kits on their persons rather than leaving them at the base. And the inReach was immediately accessible in a jacket pocket. Each of these details mattered. Rescue was completed minutes before last light; any delay would have meant an unplanned night on the route.

Parks Canada recommends that each climber carry their own satellite communication device. In this case, there was a delay between the injury and the SOS—the time it took the injured climber to regain consciousness. This was unavoidable, but had the partner carried a device, the call could have gone out sooner. (Source: Parks Canada.)

Images

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