



AAC Publications

Exposure – Inadequate Equipment

New Hampshire, Presidential Range, Mt. Adams

At 5 a.m. on February 15, Kate Matrosova, 32, of New York City, was dropped off at the Appalachia parking lot by her husband. She planned a one-day winter traverse of the northern Presidential Range, a technically moderate mountaineering objective that often has severe weather. The Mount Washington Observatory, ten miles south of Matrosova's starting point, called for gusts up to 125 mph and wind-chill values of -70°F. Matrosova made her way up the Valley Way trail and began an ascent of Mt. Adams, a smaller but exposed peak.

It appears Matrosova was beaten back from the 5,774-foot summit by the extremely high winds. She made her way back down the eastern side of Adams, where she reached the col between Adams and Mt. Madison, a half-mile above tree line. There is an Appalachian Mountain Club hut in this col, but it is closed for winter and offers no shelter. At around 3:30 p.m., Matrosova turned on her SPOT emergency locator beacon, initiating a search effort. Several New Hampshire Fish and Game officers and a small team from the Mountain Rescue Service headed up the trail at around 7 p.m. The team began their search just below tree line, where a second beacon signal had suggested Matrosova might have sought shelter. After several hours of searching, it became clear the beacon was sending faulty messages. The rescue team turned back in worsening weather.

A larger rescue team, including members of Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, hiked up the next day in equally bad conditions. The wind gusted around 100 mph. At around 2 p.m. Matrosova's body was found at Star Lake—painfully close to Matrosova's original SPOT beacon position. She appeared to have been blown over by a strong gust of wind and was found with her headlamp on. The likely cause of death was hypothermia. (Sources: SAR personnel and news reports.)

ANALYSIS

Severe wind and freezing temperatures were the main contributing factors in Matrosova's death. Matrosova was an experienced mountaineer, having climbed Rainer, Denali, and Aconcagua, but her lightweight, in-a-day approach to the traverse left her without the equipment to bivouac in such conditions. Knowing the weather forecast, recognizing when the weather is too extreme to continue, and altering a plan accordingly are extremely important parts of any mountaineering endeavor. The Mount Washington Observatory's website (www.mwobs.org) posts an accurate forecast each morning on temperature, wind speed, and wind chill for these mountains.

Carrying an emergency locator beacon on a solo hike or climb can increase safety, but not as much as a partner or bivouac gear. Moreover, this incident shows that beacon signals can be misleading to searchers, and they cannot be relied upon as your first line of defense. (Source: The Editors.)

Images



Mt. Adams from Mt. Madison. Ice-covered Star Lake, where Kate Matrosova was found, is at the foot of Adams' summit cone, left of the closed AMC hut.

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