

Skiing Fall Into Waterfall Hole

New Hampshire, Mt. Washington, Tuckerman Ravine

At 1:58 p.m. on April 22, a skier fell over the Tuckerman Ravine headwall and into one of several holes in the snowpack that frequently open in this area in the spring, caused by waterfalls flowing off rock walls. Partners and bystanders quickly initiated rescue efforts and called 911 for emergency response. A beacon search was started. At 2:18 p.m., after 20 minutes out of view of the rescuers, the subject climbed out of a different hole in the snow. He had lost his skis, poles, and pack.

The subject was alert, oriented, and able to walk but in pain from several impacts during the fall. He was also cold and wet after spending most of the 20 minutes maneuvering through very cold flowing water. The rescue party quickly changed his clothes to drier ones. They wrapped him in a sleeping bag and briefly transported him in a rescue litter obtained from the nearby Connection Cache of emergency supplies. Hoping to warm the subject, the rescue party then helped him walk down toward Hermit Lake, below Tuckerman Ravine.

Meanwhile, U.S. Forest Service snow rangers were notified of the incident by emergency dispatchers. They traveled to Hermit Lake with urgency, aware that similar accidents in Tuckerman have been fatal. They met the patient and rescue party at 3:20 p.m., on their way down to Hermit Lake. The subject was transported to Pinkham Notch via snow-cat and released to the care of friends.

ANALYSIS

As winter turns rapidly to spring, a number of hazards become prevalent in the steep terrain of the Presidential Range—and particularly the Headwall area of Tuckerman Ravine. Waterfall holes, glide cracks or crevasses, moats around cliffs and rocks, and other deep holes open as the thick snowpack melts. These holes present severe terrain traps in the event of a fall. They also can be very difficult to escape or be rescued from (and dangerous to rescuers), and with significant amounts of cold water often owing inside, a fall into one of these holes can quickly lead to hypothermia. Such accidents have resulted in several fatalities in Tuckerman Ravine. Had the subject, who was a strong athlete and a climber, been unable to self-extricate from the waterfall hole, the outcome could have been far worse.

The subject's partners and bystanders had sufficient dry clothing and emergency supplies to provide proper care for the patient. Rescuers knew that a litter and hypothermia wrap materials were available in the nearby Connection Cache and used them. All individuals on the scene had avalanche rescue gear. This group's timely and appropriate action is commendable. (Source: Mt. Washington Avalanche Center.)

Images

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