



AAC Publications

Avalanche Onto Ice Climber – Terrain Trap

Colorado, Ouray Area, Uncompahgre Gorge

Before (left) and after photos showing the ice pillar that partially collapsed and the resulting slide path.

Around 8 a.m. on January 18, a guide and three clients departed Ouray for ice climbing in the Uncompahgre Gorge. From U.S. Highway 550, the group descended a snowy slope, crossed Red Mountain Creek, and ascended another slope to the base of a climbing area known as the Dungeon or Petefish Slabs.

The guide led a pitch and set up a top-rope for the clients. Climbers 1 and 2 climbed the route with no issues and lowered to the base. While Climber 3 ascended the route, Climber 1 moved slightly to the north of the route to take pictures while Climber 2 remained south of the guide, who belayed from under the route. Suddenly, the group heard a loud cracking noise and ice and snow rained down. Climber 3 (on the route) was hit by several chunks of ice but was not injured. Once the air cleared, the group realized the snow and ice had hit and buried Climber 1.

The guide lowered Climber 3, who called 911. The guide and Climber 2 immediately descended the slope and searched for Climber 1 by digging through the debris with their hands. They couldn't find Climber 1 and thought they may have been buried in Red Mountain Creek. However, the climbers could not search the creek bottom because of a fragile snow and ice bridge and fast-flowing water underneath. The guide and Climber 2 ascended back to the belay ledge, where there was cell phone service, and the guide activated SOS via inReach and placed additional phone calls informing authorities of the exact location and situation.

At 11:38 a.m., Ouray Mountain Rescue (OMR) arrived at mile-marker 89 and descended the snowy slope. They immediately began probing, which initially produced several false-positive strikes. A rescue team member broke through the ice bridge, revealing the flowing water of the creek. At 12:23 p.m., a rescue team member found Climber 1 with a probe strike. The avalanche had buried Climber 1 head-down in the creek bed under approximately five feet of ice and snow. Resuscitation efforts from a paramedic were unsuccessful.

ANALYSIS

January 18 had dawned clear and cold after a two-day storm ended the night before. A weather station one mile south of the accident site measured three inches of new snow in the previous 24 hours. The weather station recorded a low temperature of 0°F at 4 a.m., and the temperature rose to 10°F by 10 a.m.

In most avalanche accidents, the person injured by the avalanche or someone in that person's party triggers the slide. (In Colorado over the last 30 years, only about seven percent of fatal avalanche accidents have involved a natural or spontaneous avalanche.) In this accident, however, a large chunk of ice broke away from a supported pillar and triggered a small loose snow avalanche (approximately four inches deep) on the rock slab below.

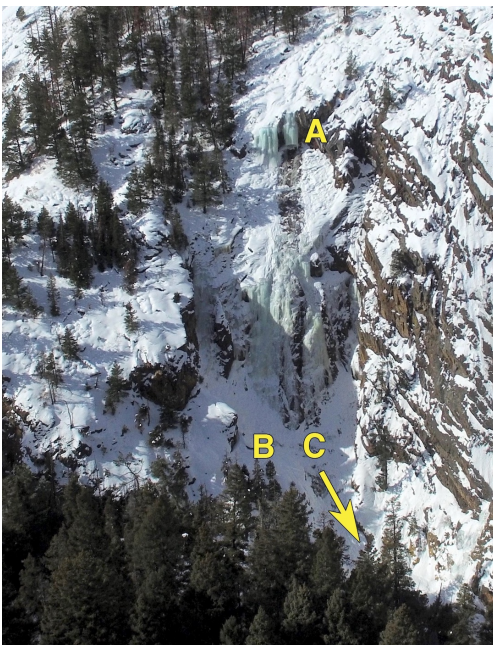
The mix of broken ice and snow debris flowed over an ice-covered cliff and entrained additional loose snow on the slope below before stopping in the creek. The moving snow alone was not enough to

injure or bury a person, but the large chunks of ice striking the victim and/or burial in the terrain trap below produced a fatal outcome. This is the fifth fatal avalanche accident in Colorado during the past 10 years that involved a climber (about seven percent of avalanche fatalities over that 10-year period). None of the climbers in the group was carrying avalanche rescue equipment, such as shovels and probes. Although it is not uncommon for ice climbers to venture into the mountains without this gear, it does limit their options in the event of an avalanche accident. In this case, the group's initial rescue effort was limited to digging with their hands and ice tools in probable locations. Technical climbers should consider carrying avalanche rescue equipment, though in this case, given the nature of the debris and the narrow gorge below, it is unlikely the outcome would have been different. (Source: Colorado Avalanche Information Center.)

Images



Before (left) and after photos showing the ice pillar that partially collapsed and the resulting slide path.



The Dungeon, near Ouray. (A) Ice pillar that broke and triggered an avalanche. (B) Location of belayer and Climber 2. (C) Location of Climber 1. The avalanche carried Climber 1 down to Red Mountain Creek (off-photo) and buried the climber.



Detail of the base of the climb where an avalanche swept a climber (C1) into Red Mountain Creek (X).

Article Details

Author	Colorado Avalanche Information Center
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	42
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports