



Lost and Stranded – Weather, Hypothermia

Oregon, Mt. Hood, South Side

On May 22, a snowboarder (male, 31) lost his bearings in whiteout conditions while descending from a summit attempt and had to spend the night out, leading to a severe case of hypothermia.

According to a post he made at Facebook after these events, it had not been the climber's intention to summit the mountain, but it was a beautiful day and he decided he had the gear and stamina to head for the top. However, the weather changed drastically during the ascent, from partly sunny to extremely low visibility. As he headed down in a whiteout, he deviated from the normal route toward Timberline Lodge and descended the fall line farther west toward the cliffs of Mississippi Head. In waist-deep snow, he attempted to use the Find My Car app on his phone to guide him toward the parking area. However, he still had a long way to go in rugged terrain, and when his phone was nearly out of life, he used the last of his battery to call 911 at around 8:30 p.m.

While he waited for help, the man dug a snow cave behind a big rock and lined it with fir boughs from the only tree in his area. He attempted to light a fire, but was unsuccessful in the wind and driving rain. He conserved the little food he had and waited.

Around 10 p.m., seven members of Portland Mountain Rescue (PMR) assembled at the day lodge at Timberline. It was decided to send a team of six to the top of the Palmer ski lift and head out from there to rescue the man, using the GPS coordinates from his phone. Travel was slow due to the deep snow. As they neared the man's location, the team started doing whistle blasts. On the second whistle, they got an answer back.

He was found at 2 a.m. at about the 6,000-foot level in Paradise Park, west of Zig Zag Canyon. He does not recall the rescuers finding him. In a state of severe hypothermia, he had removed much of his clothing (a phenomenon known as "paradoxical undressing"). He was given a high-calorie paste and hot liquid, along with warm clothing and a bivy bag, and the team built snow walls to block the wind.

The patient was unable to walk, and a helicopter evacuation was unlikely due to intermittent whiteout conditions and a projected 2.5-hour wait for the flight crew. The decision was made to drag a litter carrying the patient about 3,700 vertical feet down to the road. Additional rescuers from various teams made their way to the party to assist, and everyone finally made it to the Paradise Park trailhead at 2 p.m. on Saturday, 12 hours after the initial contact. The snowboarder was transferred to a waiting ambulance, which took him to Mountain Medical, where he was rewarmed and treated with IV fluids.

ANALYSIS

Getting an early start (often before daybreak) is usually necessary to complete a successful climb of Mt. Hood. Sticking to his original timeline and plan for not pursuing a summit, this climber may have avoided this incident. Carrying a compass or fully charged GPS and preprogrammed coordinates could have helped him find his way down to Timberline Lodge, even in whiteout conditions. He also had inadequate clothing, food, and water to survive an unexpected night out. However, the patient did well to stop and seek shelter and to call 911 before his phone died, thus giving rescuers his location

coordinates. These decisions undoubtedly saved his life. (Sources: Portland Mountain Rescue, news reports, and climber's Facebook post.)

Images



A team heads out in deep snow and poor visibility during an extended operation to rescue a snowboard mountaineer who got lost and hypothermic during his descent on Mt. Hood.



A strenuous rescue of a stranded snowboard mountaineer during a storm in May.

Article Details

Author	Portland Mountain rescue, news reports and climber's Facebook posts
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports