

## **FALL ON SNOW, FAULTY USE OF CRAMPONS**

### **Washington, North Cascades National Park, Mount Shuksan, Fisher Chimneys Route**

On September 16, John Nedila (50) slipped on a 50-degree snow slope on the Fisher Chimneys route on Mount Shuksan. He slid about 125 feet to rocks below, suffering injuries to his face, torso, and extremities. He was wearing crampons at the time.

Two passersby rendered aid. Nedila was semiconscious at first and complained of an ache in his side. But he lost both consciousness and pulse within 15 minutes. CPR was administered for 20 minutes without effect.

Rangers were unable to recover the body until the next day. (Source: Alan Budahl, Outdoor Network)

## **VARIOUS FALLS ON ROCK, PROTECTION PROBLEMS (3), HAND STUCK IN HOLD**

### **Wisconsin, Baraboo State Park**

Four reports came in from Baraboo State Park this year. All involved leader falls and three resulted in fractures. One resulted in a dislocation when the leader's hand got stuck in a hold as he fell. One fall involved a man going back up unroped to retrieve a piece of protection 30 feet up. He fell as he was reaching for the piece. The other two involved protection coming out and a belay anchor coming away.

The reports are sketchy, so not much can be gleaned other than the fact that protection placement and anchoring are still problems here. (Source: From Case Incident Reports received from Baraboo State Park)

## **FALL ON SNOW—BACK COUNTRY SKIING, TRAVELING ALONE**

### **Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park**

On April 11, Vito Seskunas (53) obtained a backcountry permit at the Moose Visitor Center for a five day ski trip to Death Canyon. He parked at the winter trailhead along the Moose-Wilson Road, and skied in. For the steeper section going up the canyon, he put climbing skins on his skis. In the afternoon, he reached where Death Canyon starts to flatten out about 300 yards below the patrol cabin. This was about five miles from his car. He skied up a gentle slope which was a drift of snow on the lee side of a boulder. When he got near the boulder, he saw that he was on a drift. He tried to ski down off the left side of the drift since trees blocked the way to the right. The left side of the drift was nearly vertical, and about 32 inches high. Below the drift, the snow was relatively level. When his ski reached the level snow, the tip dug into the snow. He heard what he assumed were breaking bones in his left ankle. His ankle was severely angulated laterally.

After the injury, Seskunas went downhill about 200 feet until he found a flat spot to set up his tent. There he spent the night. During the night he debated what to do. He had enough food and fuel to last several days, but he knew no one would miss him until the evening of April 15 at the earliest. He had not

taken a cell phone since he felt they too often provided a false sense of security to backcountry travelers who should be prepared to deal with their own problems. He was without a sure way to signal for assistance. His tent was pitched on the snow covering the stream just above where it drops down the cascades leaving the flat part of the canyon. His camp had a good view of the valley from Phelps Lake to the north end of the airport and a section of the highway. He felt that if he had to stay put he could try to build a signal fire, but there was no way to know for certain that his signaling efforts were effective.

Due to the apparent severity of his injury, he decided that his highest priority was to get out so he could get medical attention as soon as possible. He became mentally very focused and compartmentalized. He refused to think about the accident or anything other than getting out.

He thought about splinting the foot, but his limited first aid training had taught him that he needed to take the boot off the foot before it was splinted. He was afraid that if he took the boot off, he would not be able to get it back on. He was concerned about keeping it as warm as possible and protected as he crawled out. He did not think about splinting over the boot and incorporating the boot into a splint using his foam chair, for example, because that was not an option presented in his first aid training. He left the boot on his injured foot as a splint.

By the morning of April 12, he had made the decision to try to get out on his own power. He felt that since he could not bear any weight on his ankle, he would go as light as possible. He took only his ski poles and some granola bars. He was dressed in a synthetic shirt and a good Gore-Tex mountain jacket on his upper body and light cotton pants with T3 ski boots. He had mitten shells and light gloves. He thought about wearing his Gore-Tex pants, but he decided not to since they had a zipper on the backside that he felt would create a pressure point. He knew that he would be sitting and sliding on his rear for a long time and he was afraid of bruising and problems from the zipper. He expected that it would take two or three days to get out.

His primary method for moving was to have his feet in front of him and to push along with his hands and pull with his good foot, with a rest on his butt while he moved his hands and foot. He followed the summer trail as best he could, even though it was covered in deep snow until he was lower in the canyon. He had to cross some steep snow fields, but they were soft enough that he was able to negotiate them with little difficulty. In general, traveling was easier when the snow was firm. Soft snow was not as easy to move through. The initial descent of Death Canyon was relatively easy compared to the flatter section from Phelps Lake Overlook to the road.

He had a good breakfast on the morning of April 12 and left camp around 0630. He stopped about 2030 that evening in the flat part of the canyon above the lake. He found a sheltering tree and made a bough bed. His pants were wet and he lay on his side to try to dry them. He was able to sleep most of the night. On occasion, he awoke with a jerk, due to muscle spasms, he thought, and then he would shiver for a few minutes. He would eventually get back to sleep, and he slept soundly from 0300 to 0600 when he wanted to get up and get moving.

When asked about the mental processes he used to keep going, he said that he loves life with a passion. He loves the outdoors and activities like climbing and skiing. The outdoors is his church. He also loves his family, friends and music. He has a lot to live for. These things provided him with a very positive image of what he did not want to lose. His life is full and he wants to experience it more. During this trip out, it never occurred to him that he might die. His mental process for getting out involved these things that are important to him. He broke the trip into mentally manageable goals using landmarks. Getting across this open space. Getting to that tree. He developed a personal mantra based on counting steps. When he moved, he counted each move. He tried to move in sets of 100 movements. He dedicated each set to someone or something he loved. He would dedicate this 100 moves to his wife, the next set to a son, the next set to his cat, etc. The numbers were important. At the end of the set, he would rest and put his hands inside his jacket to try to warm his hands in his armpits.

On the morning of April 13, he completed the flat portion at the bottom of the canyon to where the trail starts up the Phelps Lake Moraine. When he neared Phelps Lake, he thought about trying to go along the lakeshore, but the bad spring ice conditions caused him to feel that he would have to be up in the woods, and that he would likely find the going tough due to ravines and downed trees. Instead he opted to stay on the trail he used on the way in. He knew that way, and there was a chance other skiers might use the trail. Unfortunately, this was a period of poor weather that did not encourage many folks to be out. Going up over the Phelps Lake moraine was a "bear" for him. There is about 700 vertical feet that he had to gain. About two-thirds of the trail had a mound of snow on the trail tread, with the side of the trail melted out. On the third that was melted the tread was bare, and he was able to use his ski poles as crutches. This was easier for him than being on his backside. He was not able to do 100 moves without stopping while going up the moraine, but he expected that and he did as much as he could before he rested. When he neared the top, he passed a long snow slope that led down to near the lake. At that point he thought he heard voices at the lake, and for a brief moment he thought about how easy it would be to slide down the snow to seek the voices. He quickly decided that he had worked too hard to get up the moraine and that he would not think about the possibility of finding people at the lake. He passed the top of the moraine about 2030 and went another half hour before finding a tree for the night. He found the level area at the top of the overlook a challenge to determine where the trail was located and he kept going until he knew he was not straying from it.

He was able to sleep most of the night with the same irritation of being jolted awake by muscle spasms a few times. They were followed by a few minutes of shivering and then he was able to get back to sleep. He awoke at 0600 and started on again. He had hoped to get out in three days, so he was motivated to make the car by that night. The gently sloping Valley Trail was much slower going than the steeper terrain coming down the canyon. He kept to the

same mantra of dedicating 100 moves to someone he loved. He passed the trailhead bulletin board at the Whitegrass cabin at 2200. He finally felt that if he kept going, he might become totally exhausted, so he stopped under a good tree at 2230. He slept well again with a few wake-ups due to cramps early in the night. He got his usual 0600 start.

On the morning of April 16 around 0900, he was met by skiers about 400 yards from his car. He asked them for food, but at first did not ask for assistance. They gave him another jacket and insulated him from the snow he was sitting on, while one of the party went to Moose to report the incident. A rescue was organized and Ranger Culver walked in as a first responder while Rangers Burgette, Page, and Spomer responded with a snowmobile, sled, and ambulance. His foot was angulated so that the leg could not be splinted with one of the usual splints. Instead, he was placed in the sled on the rescue sleeping bag, and the leg was splinted with blankets and his other leg. His legs were tied together at the knees with a triangular bandage, the top of the sleeping bag was put over him, and the straps were cinched down snug enough to stabilize him. He was then driven slowly to the trailhead.

At St. John's Hospital it was determined that his injuries included an open fracture of the left tibia, a fractured fibula, and ligament damage. His feet did not have any frostbite. Due to the blood trapped in his boot for three-and-a-half days, his injury was compounded by infection. Other injuries were minor but included abrasion of the skin on his fingers, bruised knuckles, frostnipped fingers, and extensive bruising of his backside.

### **Analysis**

In analyzing the accident, two factors were determined to be key. The skis he was using were Rossignol Black Widows. Black Widows are noted for their stiff tips that dig into soft snow instead of flexing and riding up on top. In the afternoon, the surface of the snow was soft, and the tip dug in. Even with the tip dug in, it did not seem that there was enough energy in the fall to cause the severe open fracture/dislocation he sustained. The other key factor was the heavy pack that Seskunas was wearing. As he fell with a twisting motion with the ski relatively fixed in the snow, the weight of the pack provided the force to cause the fracture/dislocation. Skiing off the drift onto the flat snow should have been uneventful, but it was not.

Seskunas found himself in a tough situation knowing that he had a significant injury that needed attention, but knowing that no one would start looking for him until after his wife called the park when she did not hear from him on the night of April 15. He made decisions that were not necessarily the best, but he had a reason for everything he did or did not do. To do it over again, he would probably start out with his Gore-Tex pants and discard them if the zipper really became a problem. He would also probably have taken his thick Datchstein wool mittens, since the gloves and overmitts he had were trashed with the wear they received. The thicker mitts might have prevented some of the bruising on his knuckles and reduced the abrasions on the tops of his fingers.

He did not try to build fires because he was worried that with his limited mobility, if a fire got out of hand, he might not be able to move away from it

quickly enough. He purposefully dressed lightly since he thought being too warm would be a bigger problem than being too cold. In fact, he was able to sleep remarkably well each night even though he was wearing a single thin layer of wet cotton on his lower body and his upper body just had a thin wicking top with a Gore-Tex shell. The weather was 20-40 degrees F, and it snowed or rained a quarter-inch of moisture on the night of April 13.

This is an example of a positive attitude, resourcefulness, the acceptance of the responsibility to take care of one's self in the backcountry and a strong will to live. (Source: Dan Burgette, SAR Coordinator, Grand Teton National Park) *(Editor's Note: While not a climbing accident, this report is included for the reasons stated in the last sentence above. I anticipate there will be some debate as to how he might have splinted his foot—and, dare I say it, whether a cell phone might have been a good idea. Those of Mr. Seskunas' generation would have done as he did, I suspect.)*

## **SLIP ON SNOW—TWICE, NO BELAY**

### **Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Mount Moran**

On July 3, the Jones party signed out at the Jenny Lake Ranger Station as two separate groups of four to climb the Skillet Glacier route on Mount Moran. On July 4, they started across Jackson Lake in two small boats headed for the base on Mount Moran. Waves swamped their boats and they were rescued by NPS Rangers. On July 5, they were delivered to the base of Moran by a Signal Mountain shuttle boat. They climbed to the Skillet moraine and camped for the night. They left camp on July 6 at 0400 in three roped teams. Four of them retreated to camp at 0700, while Ben Boykin (40), Tom Jones (43), Steve Harris and Jeb Stewart continued to the summit, arriving around 1500. (They required 11 hours for the ascent. The average time for ascent is less than seven hours.)

During the descent, Tom Jones, who was not belayed at the time and had removed his helmet, slipped and slid about 1,000 feet down the "Handle" of the Skillet. Apparently he was not injured, and after he stopped sliding, continued his descent at a more sedate pace. As he attempted to turn the "Rock Island" on the south side, he slipped again, glanced off the Rock Island, cleared the bergschrund and came to rest on the low angled section of the "Pan." The members of the party who had turned back at 0700 saw him fall and went to his assistance. They were able to get Jones back to their camp and Jim called for help on his cell phone. The call was received by the SAR coordinator at 1930.

The contract helicopter arrived at Lupine Meadows at 2015, the pilot was briefed and then transported Rangers Weathermon and Jernigan with medical equipment to a landing zone near the patient's camp. Jones was placed on a backboard and in a litter while the helicopter returned to Lupine Meadows. As the patient was moved to the landing zone, the helicopter flew back to the glacier for a pickup about 2115, arriving at Lupine Meadows at 2120. Jones was transported to St. John's Hospital by Medic 1. (Source: Tom Kimbrough, NPS Ranger, Grand Teton National Park)

### **Analysis**

It seems inevitable to have a Skillet Glacier incident. This one was classic for