

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Fifty-Sixth Annual Report of the Safety Committees of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

This is the fifty-sixth issue of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* and the twenty-fifth issue in which The Alpine Club of Canada has contributed data and narratives.

Canada: Once again it was the year of the stranded climber in Canada, with five reported incidents where the parties involved got themselves into situations where they were unable to ascend or descend without assistance. Also of note were incidents of rockfall or icefall. Rapid changes in temperature increase the hazards and in the case of ice climbing, a rapid drop in temperatures leads to fracturing and can result in a catastrophic failure of ice formations. The fatality at Louise Falls was just such an incident. We are seeing an increased number of ice climbing accidents which correlates with an increase in the popularity of this sport. Lower extremity injuries are a common consequence of falling even a short distance while wearing crampons.

There are many accidents in Canada which are going unreported in this book. Once again, for reasons of lack of funding, it was not possible to provide comprehensive data from B.C. Parks. It is also difficult to obtain data for accidents outside of the Canadian Rockies region despite our attempts to solicit information. We are sure that there must be more accidents east of Alberta! If anyone has knowledge of a climbing accident, you are encouraged to report it to the Editor in the hopes of preventing similar accidents through sharing of information with others.

We wish to thank the following individuals for their contributions and assistance in tracking down information throughout the year: Nancy Hansen, Marc Ledwidge, Burke Duncan, Jim Mamalis, Brent Kozachenko, Ian Greant, Marcus Eyre, Dave Stephens, Paul Walton, Gord Irwin, Judy Lynne, Greg McDonnell, Mike Rogers, and Frederic Lebarre.

United States: Fatalities, at 34, were back to an above-average level for the past ten years. Given the variety and scope of climbing areas in the U.S. and given the numbers of climbers out there, it is hard to predict from year to year what the fatality and serious injury totals will be. The number of accidents reported each year seems to be holding steady. This is encouraging, because both the sport and the reporting network has grown.

Speaking of numbers, the Outdoor Industry Association has put forward an estimated count of persons 16 years or older who have “climbed at least once with a rope and harness on a natural rock surface” at six million. They put the number of “enthusiasts”—those who engage in this activity at least ten times per year—at 1.3 million. While they claim statistical reliability with the instrument they used, I find this number to defy what land manag-

ers, other climbers, and local knowledge tell me. I still stand by a number of 250-300,000. But the good news is that if the number IS 1.3 million, we are seeing a very low accident and fatality rate.

An interesting thing to ponder when considering consequences of a fall is: How far is too far to fall? The American College of Surgeons calls for assuming neck and back injuries, as well as fractures, for anyone who falls from a height greater than 20 feet. It seems that from the reports we receive, ten feet often leads to serious injury. This is why placing good protection at reasonable intervals is recommended. The trickiest part of any climb is when departing from the ground to the first piece of protection.

Inadequate protection and protection pulling out continue to figure heavily in direct and contributory causes for the injuries and fatalities, which is, of course, because falls in these cases are longer—including going all the way to the ground sometimes. Descending errors are mostly the result of lowering climbers rather than rappels. These are primarily due to ropes being too short (and no knot being tied in the end), speed build-up so the belayer can't hang on, and inadequate anchoring.

There were quite a few climbing areas that had no reports of accidents resulting in injuries or fatalities. Most noteworthy were Joshua Tree National Park and Devil's Lake State Park. Not seen in the narratives are three reports from City of Rocks—leader falls with not enough protection. The Climbing Ranger there, Brad Shilling, believes that 60-meter ropes have helped reduce belay/rappel accidents significantly, as has a focus on good communication skills. There was one incident from Montana. A falling rock set loose from climbers above on the East Ridge of Granite Peak resulted in a fractured hand to someone below—and his subsequent fall. Rangers from the Grand Tetons had to be called in for the rescue. Not ready in time for publication were four reports from Mount Orizaba in Mexico. We finally have a contact there!

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following—with apologies for any omissions—for collecting data and helping with the report: Hank Alicandri, Dave Brown, Jim Detterline, Erik Hansen Al Hospers, Chuck Lindsay, Mark Magnuson, Tom Moyer, Steve Muelhauser, Leo Paik, Steve Rollins, Brad Shilling, Robert Speik, Eric White, Willow Williamson, all individuals who sent in personal stories, and, of course, George Sainsbury.

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