

CANADA

AVALANCHE

Alberta, Banff National Park, Mount Wilson, Wilson Major

On January 10, J.W. (29) and J.S. (23) were approaching the ice climb Wilson Major on Mount Wilson. They had climbed up the WI III approach pitches of Lady Wilson's Cleavage and were traversing the steep snow slopes below Wilson Major when they triggered a slab avalanche and were swept down into the trees below. Neither was totally buried, but J.S. suffered a broken ankle from impact with a tree. J.W. wrapped J.S. up in blankets and descended to the Saskatchewan Crossing Warden Station where the district warden's wife was able to call for a Warden rescue team. J.S. was evacuated by heli-sling to a waiting ambulance.

Analysis

Avalanches are one of the major objective dangers to ice climbing in the Rockies. On some climbs the danger is just from avalanches sweeping down the waterfall from terrain above, but in many instances there are avalanche slopes that need to be crossed on the approach or descent route or on low angle sections that hold snow on the climb itself. There are numerous cases of ice climbing parties being involved in avalanches that they themselves triggered. It is not uncommon for ice climbers to travel without avalanche rescue gear such as beacons probes and shovels. In this instance the party triggered a slab on an early season deep instability of facets on crust. The weakness was well known throughout the ranges of Canada in the winter of 2003 and was the layer attributed to most of the fatal avalanches that occurred. It is not known what level of avalanche awareness the party had or if they were cognizant of the avalanche danger rating of "Considerable" in the area. This party was very fortunate that they did not suffer more serious injuries as the avalanche ran down over small cliffs and into mature timber. If there had been a total burial, neither had the gear to perform a self-rescue. It is common practice in avalanche terrain for one person to cross a suspect slope at a time while the other observes from an island of safety. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service, Bradford White)

(Editor's Note: With skiers included, there have been 70 avalanche fatalities within the past five years.)

FALL ON ICE

Alberta, Banff National Park, Five Mile Creek, Mount Cory, Dumber

On January 19, D.B. and G.H. were top-roping an ice climb known as "Dumber" above Five Mile Creek on the east slopes of Mount Cory. While attempting to step up on his crampon after placing his tools, G.H.'s foot slipped and he smashed his knee against the ice and dislocated his kneecap. D.B. tied G.H. off and also placed an ice screw under each foot to ease the strain of hanging, he then descended to call for help from a place where

he could get cell reception. Wardens responded to the scene by HFRS (Helicopter Flight Rescue System), splinted the leg and lowered G.H. to a point where he could be packaged on a vacuum mattress, stretcher and Baumann bag and heli-slung out.

Analysis

Top-roping does not necessarily mean that a slip may not cause an injury, as this incident points out. It is important to be sure that one's tool or crampon placement is secure before placing full weight on it. It is not known why D.B. did not lower G.H. further down to a point where he would not have been hanging. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service, Bradford White)

FALL ON ICE, PROTECTION (TOOLS) PULLED

Alberta, Banff National Park, Mount Murchison, Balfour Wall

On February 9, R.C. (40) was with a large group climbing on the Balfour Wall, an area with a variety of one-pitch top-ropeable ice climbs on the lower slopes of Mount Murchison in Banff National Park. R.C. was about half way up a pitch that he was leading and had stopped to place his first screw. His tools pulled out and he fell down to the base of the pitch and broke both of his ankles. Part of the team descended to the Icefields Parkway where they flagged down a passing Parks vehicle and reported the accident. A warden rescue team heli-slung into the site, splinted both ankles, and R.C. was heli-slung out to a waiting ambulance.

Analysis

Broken lower limbs are the most common injury in ice climbing falls. It is also fairly common to break both legs/ankles. The only real way to prevent such injuries while ice climbing is not to fall. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service, Bradford White)

FALL ON ICE, UNROPED

Alberta, Banff National Park, Johnston Canyon

On February 13, L.R. (26) and her boyfriend (L.) were doing some ice climbing at the upper falls in Johnston Canyon, a popular area of one pitch top-ropeable ice climbs. L.R. unclipped from the belay station, which was about ten meters up some low-angle ice from the canyon bottom, and climbed down to her pack to get some water. On the climb back up to the stance she slipped and fell back down to the bottom, catching her crampon and breaking her ankle and lower leg in the process. Passers by descended to the phone at the bottom of the trail and called the Warden Service to report the accident. Meanwhile L. fashioned an improvised splint from ice tools and a jacket and began to piggy-back carry L.R. down the trail. A rescue crew of wardens and paramedics met the pair part way, re-splinted the leg, administered morphine for the pain and wheeled the patient down to the ambulance in the wheeled stretcher.

Analysis

It is unlikely that most parties would have belayed on the low angle ice where L.R. fell, but this incident shows the possible consequences of even a simple