

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

British Columbia, Kootenay National Park, Haffner Creek

At about 11:00 a.m. on December 3, Banff Park wardens were called to a rescue at Haffner Creek, in Kootenay National Park, where a man in his 30s had fallen from an ice climb, according to public safety warden Lisa Paulson. The man was about 20 feet from the ground and about to clip his first ice screw when he fell, resulting in a broken ankle. He was rescued from the site by helicopter.

This isn't the first rescue performed at popular Haffner Creek, which is an easily accessed canyon off the Highway 93 South with a multitude of single pitch ice and mixed climbs. "With respect to that spot, a lot of people go there to practice," she said. "It's really well known. Everybody's really careful there but it's still been a few broken ankles pulled out of there."

While they were waiting to chopper out the patient, another climber took a four-meter fall and decked. Fortunately he managed to get up, dust off, and walk away. (Source: Edited from a report by Amanda Follett, *Banff Crag & Canyon*, and Joe McKay)

EXPOSURE, WEATHER

Yukon, Kluane National Park, Mount Logan, King Trench

An eight-member team from North Shore Rescue set out on May 7 to climb Mount Logan in the Yukon, Canada's highest peak at 5,959 meters (19,541 feet), to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the rescue organization. All were experienced mountain climbers who planned to take a month to complete their expedition. Climbing conditions are good in May because there are relatively few crevasses at that time of year. In the early part of their trip, the weather varied between storms and brilliant sunshine. One of the team members made it to the summit of Mount Logan. The others made it to secondary peaks, 40 meters (131 feet) lower, before deciding to turn around, partly because of the ferocious winds the climbers were battling. Alex Snigurowicz (45), Don Jardne (51), and Eric Bjornson (41) had started to head down on May 25 from the camp about 5,900 meters (19,400 feet) and were climbing across an exposed ridge when the weather started to change unexpectedly. "We could see it from a distance," said Snigurowicz. Quickly, the situation got exponentially worse, with driving snow and whiteout conditions. The three were trapped at 5,500 meters about 500 meters from the summit on Prospectors Col, which forms part of Logan's King Trench route. During their 48-hour ordeal, temperatures dropped to -30 C. "We were in the worst place you could be when it hit," Jardne said. "You couldn't see a thing. It was just coming at you from everywhere." They put up their tent and secured it with ice screws.

They spent the rest of that day and night being buffeted by wind, wondering if the tent would hold. Roaring blasts of wind pummeled the tent all night, at times so powerfully that the 175-pound Jardne, sitting by the tent's edge, was lifted right up. Frostbite was already setting into Bjornson's hands, causing enormous blisters, so Jardne and Snigurowicz decided, while the storm continued, that they should dig a snow cave in case something happened to the tent. Snigurowicz was in the entrance to the tent putting on his crampons and Jardne was already outside when the wind started lifting the tent with Bjornson still inside it. "I was trying to push it back," Jardne said, "but I just couldn't keep the tent down anymore." Without the weight of the two other men, the tent flipped, despite Bjornson's 240 pounds. His companions hauled him out and the wind sucked the tent away, along with a sleeping bag, shovels, their stove and a pack. Bjornson said the trio lost some of their gear when their tent blew away in the violent storm. "I could only grab so much stuff out of the tent before it went over the cliff. And one of the things I failed to grab was my overmitts, so I had my hands exposed for most of the time," he said, adding he was without the gloves for three days. "It was just one of those things you knew was going to get ugly," he said. "We had the tent tied in with ice screws and you could hear the fabric start to rip and once the tent was gone, I thought we were gone." With Bjornson wrapped in his sleeping bag and propped on skis and a foam pad in a rock niche, his partners spent six hours digging and scraping with a pot lid and ice ax to make the cave.

"When your life depends on it, you just work as hard as you can. We just huddled together in a snow cave and that helped keep ourselves warm and if you can't stay warm, you're gonna die," they said.

The three men huddled on two Therm-A-Rest sleeping pads with one sleeping bag between them. At dawn on May 27, the sun rose and the storm broke, allowing the trapped climbers to call for help on their radio to a fellow team member who had a satellite phone. The North Shore climbers were lucky. Through the combined actions of their fellow North Shore Rescue team members, the Canadian and U.S. parks services and U.S Air National Guard, they were rescued by helicopter from the mountain around midnight Friday and were flown to hospital in Anchorage. All three climbers suffered severe frostbite to their fingers and toes while they were trapped on the mountain.

Altogether, 24 personnel from the Kluane Park and Alaska took part in the operation, involving five helicopters, including a high-altitude Llama provided by the Denali National Park.

Analysis

Acting chief Warden Rhonda Markel credited the climbers' preparedness for saving their lives. "They were experienced climbers but there are risks and

hazards out there,” she said. “We all had radios between us so we could notify them of the problem and tell them what to do and that’s what got the ball rolling,” said Snigurowicz. On the afternoon of May 27, two others reached the trapped climbers and provided them with a tent until they were rescued on May 28. Park officials said those climbers were crucial to the success of the rescue. (Source: Various reports, including one from Denali National Park)

Canada’s highest mountain measures in at 5,956 meters (19,541 feet), compared to 6,193 meters (20,320 feet) for Denali, the continent’s highest peak. In the 22 years since the park was formed in 1973, there have been 18 deaths, of which 11 have occurred on Logan and seven in others areas of the St. Elias mountains. The climbing season for Mount Logan usually begins in late April and runs to late June, before the warmer temperatures have a chance to destabilize snow and ice conditions. Mount Logan is notorious for its sudden snow squalls that blow in from the Pacific Ocean. (Source: *Whitehorse Daily Star*, Chuck Tobin; Jane Seyd, *North Shore News*)

AVALANCHE, WEATHER, UNROPED

Yukon, Kluane National Park, Mount Logan, East Ridge

J.A. (22) and her partner C.D. (34) began their expedition on May 27. They were scheduled to return by June 25. J.A. had previously summited the King’s Trench on Mount Logan at age 17, setting a record as the youngest person to scale the peak. She had also done the West Buttress on Denali. On May 31, J.A. was climbing at about 2,865 meters when a small avalanche swept her off her feet and down the East Ridge. The slide started about 20 feet in front of C.D., but missed him and hit J.A. instead. “It wasn’t a big one, but just enough to kick her off her feet,” said Rhonda Markel, Acting Chief Warden. J.A. fell 1,500 feet. The avalanche did not bury her, but it appears she died from head injuries. C.D. avoided the onslaught of snow and ice. He found his partner dead by the time he was able to reach her after descending from the 2,865-meter (9,400-foot) elevation.

The climbing team was not equipped with a satellite telephone. C.D. was unable to reach help for several days. Park officials only learned of the incident after J.A.’s partner waved down a Trans North helicopter.

Analysis

Markel indicated that it is likely that the rough weather climbers have experienced on the mountain so far this spring played a factor. She said there is an indication there was an abnormal buildup of wet snow on the ridge that came loose. Snow at that elevation would normally just blow off the ridge, but Markel suspects there was a buildup because of its heavy and moist condition. Markel said the thick layer of wet snow left by the storm likely caused or contributed to the avalanche. “I guess it was a pretty techni-