

CANADA

FALL ON ICE, ROPED BUT NOT BELAYED

Alberta, Rocky Mountains, Mount Aberdeen

The initial pitches of the North Glacier route of Mount Aberdeen consist of 35-degree ice, usually bare in summer. On July 14, 1990, two climbers were roped together and moving simultaneously up this section without protection when the lower one lost a crampon, slipped, and pulled his partner from his stance. They fell about 65 meters and stopped in the rocks below. One of them sustained an ankle fracture while the other sustained ankle and wrist fractures. The latter lowered his partner to a more comfortable position and then retraced the approach to summon help. After about five hours of hobbling, he came across a hiking party; they went out and reported the accident. Both victims were rescued later that day by the Banff Warden Service.

Analysis

It should be recognized that, on even 'moderately' steep ice, it is very difficult to arrest a fall, particularly when roped to another climber. If the use of the rope is required, then the use of a proper anchor and belay is probably also required. (Source: Marc Ledwidge, Warden Service, Banff National Park)

AVALANCHE, INADEQUATE PREPARATION AND ROUTE SELECTION

Alberta, Rocky Mountains, Mount Andromeda

The morning of September 4, 1990, dawned with pristine clarity in the Columbia Icefields area. R.D. and J.E., both of Salt Lake City, Utah, had just arrived to do some ice climbing and were already en route to "Photo Finish," a smear of ice on the northeast face of Mount Andromeda, when the first rays of sun began to hit the ice-capped peaks. At 0930, climbing roped but unprotected through the center of the "Big Bowl" of Andromeda, the climbers were just approaching the bergschrund below the left of the base of their climb when the snow cracked above and around J.E., who was in the lead. Carried along helpless by the flow, he was just able to glimpse his partner scrambling to reach the right margin of the slide before he himself was tumbled over a crevasse and jerked to a sudden stop, on top and alert. J.D. was nowhere in sight. Climbing back to the edge of the crevasse he had just flown over, J.E. realized the reason for his abrupt halt: about two meters down was a ledge piled with snow into which the other end of his rope disappeared—one climbing boot protruded from the pile. J.E. was able to dig out and revive his partner, but R.D. was in no condition to travel. J.E. left him anchored to the crevasse wall and went for help, contacting the Parks Service at noon.

R.D. was reached by helicopter at 1351 and evacuated by HFRS (slinging) techniques at 1429. Six hours after his accident, he was being treated for hypothermia and badly frost-bitten hands in the hospital in Jasper.

Analysis

During the first two days of September, over 30 cm of snow fell at upper elevations in the Columbia Icefield area. The icy summit of 3450 meter Mount Andromeda had been lashed by gale-force winds during the latter part of that storm. Ridges and faces had been largely cleared of the new snow, but a drift slab had formed in the more protected area of the bowl, and it was resting on a hardened base.

The climbers had started early, not speaking to Park staff about past or present conditions, not wanting to wait for the opening of the information office at 0900, lest the promise of a spectacular day be lost. Though both of them were familiar with waterfall ice, neither listed winter mountaineering in his experience. Had they been aware of recent conditions, or had they spoken to someone more knowledgeable of alpine ice or potential hazards, they may not have chosen the fresh snow field in the center of the bowl as their approach to the climb, an approach also exposed to an overhanging bulge of ice. (Source: Clair Israelson, Canadian Parks Service)

FALL INTO CREVASSE, UNROPED, PUBLIC ON GLACIER

Alberta, Rocky Mountains, Athabasca Glacier

July 25, 1990, was a warm, sunny day, as a family of four from Calgary, Alberta, stopped at the Columbia Icefields in Jasper National Park and took a walk on the Athabasca Glacier. The oldest child, Tyson (10), was lightly dressed. About 1700, he ran out ahead of his parents and disappeared; he had slipped and fallen into a tapering crack and become wedged about three meters from the surface. His father ran for assistance and located a guided walking tour on the ice. The group leader returned to the crevasse with the father, set two ice screws as an anchor, and lowered himself. Being larger than the boy, he could not descend quite as far as him, but was able to secure a rope onto one of his ankles. Returning to the surface, the guide attempted, with the father, to pull the boy out, but the pressures involved caused Tyson to scream in pain, so this method of extrication was abandoned.

Park wardens were contacted at 1730, and the boy was removed, unconscious, from the crevasse, at 1848. Continuous resuscitation efforts at the scene, and later advanced life support, were unable to revive him. He was pronounced dead at 0200 the following morning.

Analysis

Hundreds of carefree tourists walk past warning signs at the toe of this glacier every year, and wander around on the surface of the ice without incident. To the general public it seems to be a straightforward and harmless activity requiring no special equipment or expertise, but a simple slip on the ice is all that was necessary to turn the natural exuberance of a child into a family tragedy. (Source: Clair Israelson, Canadian Parks Service)

(Editor's Note: This accident is not included in the data, but a discussion of how it could have been prevented quickly becomes a philosophic debate on individual rights and responsibilities, and the purposes of a National Park. It seems that when visitors ignore warning signs, they take on themselves the responsibility for their own safety. In Jasper National Park, which contains innumerable hazards, the only practical alternative to warning signs and notices might be to close the entire park to visitors. If closure cannot be considered, then visitors will have to be more careful.)