

FALL ON ICE, ICE TOOLS PULLED THROUGH MELTING ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, WEATHER

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Hallett Chimney

On May 13, my partner and I (32) set out for Hallett Chimney. The weather was warming, and a sunny day expected, following a great many spring snowstorms. This day, temperatures were expected to rise as high as 10 degrees C, although we expected Hallett's north facing chimney to remain colder. The snow was firm for the approach, although it began to turn to corn as we finished the approach to the base at 0730. On the hike in, it was apparent that water on the few exposed rocks on the trail had not completely frozen overnight. Based on our recent visits to the park, and the depth of the snowpack, we expected the snow and ice route to be in prime shape. We were wrong.

The first four roped pitches, which brought us to a belay at the base of the pitch through the chockstone-capped section of the chimney, were challenging and enjoyable. We found secure but sparse protection on the rock. Ice screws were essentially worthless. The ice varied from a softening thin layer on the rock to a thin layer encrusting deep snow. We were occasionally showered by snow melting off the chimney walls. The climbing was well within our abilities, so we were undaunted by the soft ice. It was a beautiful day and we felt good about the climb.

The chockstone pitch was my partner's lead. Notwithstanding his alpine experience, the loose snow and deteriorating ice challenged him. He progressed slowly upward, and established a good belay on the ledge of the steep snow slope just above the chockstone.

Mine was the next lead, the last before easier ground leading to the top. I moved up the snow gully to its top, a snow wall below an ice sheet. The ice sheet encrusted snow which clogged the chimney above. The rock on the chimney walls beneath the snow and ice overhang revealed no possibility of protection. Rather than digging snow away from the chimney's walls, I opted to step up right onto steeper ground with an eye to skirting the insecure ice along a steep rock ramp at the right edge of the ice. Unfortunately, once up a couple of committing and difficult moves to an ice ledge plastered to the rock, my hopes for cracks for protection and more secure climbing were dashed.

Run out for 12 meters from my belay, I now found myself with three depressing options—none of which included protection, all of which held the distinct possibility of a long fall. Down-climbing probably would have been the better choice, though it did not appear so at the time. The rock ramp offered at least three meters of 1.2 cm melting verglass on steep moss-covered, crackless rock. I opted to pull onto the six to eight meter ice sheet, which at least appeared likely to remain affixed to the wall.

I sank my axes into the porous ice, overhead and slightly left, testing them to the extent possible without committing myself. I then committed my weight to their grip. As I lifted a foot toward the bottom of the sheet, just above knee height, both axes pulled through the deteriorating ice. I fell backward, landing approximately ten meters below in the steep snow gully. I attempted to self-arrest, but carried too much momentum. I skidded down the snow toward the chockstone, striking it, then falling through the opening it formed at the top of the chimney. Three or four meters below, the rope stopped my fall. I had taken a frightful 25 meter fall, but, incredibly, could move all of my limbs and collect my thoughts. My right shoulder and ribs hurt, but I was not immobilized.

Chris lowered me to our last belay, and we then began six single-rope-length rappels, and belayed descents of two snowfields. My fall occurred 180 to 200 meters above the base. Once there, I was able to hike out. (Source: John Seebohm)

Analysis

As with all mixed alpine climbs, this climb required judgment calls about changing conditions. There was sufficient snow and ice to climb, but the warm temperature was against us. In retrospect, we may have wrongly ignored early signs of significant warming: water on rocks encountered along the approach which had not frozen overnight, and softening snow, both at the base and on the route. Yet, the weather in the preceding days had been cold, and our climb was north facing. We incorrectly thought it would be in fine shape.

As we progressed up the climb, the lack of secure protection on ice did not greatly concern us. We were able to find sufficient protection along the rock for comfortable climbing, given our abilities. Apparent protection ran out at the point where the melting conditions made for treacherous climbing. It is doubtful that such a fall could have been altogether avoided without turning back. Having chosen to go forward, I might have searched longer for protection prior to committing myself to steep ground which posed as much danger to ascend as to descend.

On the other hand, our experience and safety-consciousness ultimately served us well, although the preceding account might lead one to seriously question whether we had learned anything in our 30 years of combined climbing experience.

A sound belay, established by my partner, held a forceful fall. My helmet likely prevented more serious injury, as I struck the chockstone encountered in my fall with my head, shoulder and ribs. Even with the helmet, it is pure luck that I did not receive greater injuries than a bruised shoulder and ribs.

After the fall, we maintained our composure and effected a safe self-rescue without further mishap. (Source: John Seebohm)

LOSS OF CONTROL—VOLUNTARY GLISSADE, INADEQUATE INSTRUCTION AND SUPERVISION, POOR POSITION

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Andrews Glacier

On June 14 at 1300, Mike Hill was leading a group of 25 to 30 juveniles from River Valley High School, Spring Green, Wisconsin, in a glissading class on Andrews Glacier. A 17 year old female failed to maintain control, and broke her right fibula while glissading. Hill, a former EMT, initiated a self-rescue with an improvised litter. (Source: Rocky Mountain National Park Rangers)

Analysis

During an interview with Hill, Park Service investigators found out that the group had not been properly briefed before attempting actual glissade practice. The group was also insufficiently supervised, as there were too many students per instructor. The runouts at the base of Andrews Glacier are somewhat dangerous, ending in a deep, cold alpine lake on one part and in talus on another part. This kind of exercise requires (1) doing more prebriefing, (2) having more instructors per student, and (3) using a different, safer location. (Source: Rocky Mountain National Park Rangers)