

LOST, CLIMBING ALONE, HYPOTHERMIA, WEATHER, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT

Alberta, Columbia Icefield, Mount Athabasca

On Sept. 26, a lone climber took out a safety registration for a climb of Mount Athabasca, with a return time of 1200 the next day indicated, although the climber had no intention of over-nighting on the mountain. He was experienced, and successfully climbed the Silverhorn route. However, he was unfamiliar with the topography of the mountain, and a whiteout on the way up prevented him from viewing the standard descent route, which leaves the west ridge and follows a wide horizontal traverse to the right to avoid a large icefall.

From the summit, he started down the ridge toward the standard route, completely unaware of an alternative descent via the Athabasca-Andromeda Col, which could be reached by following the southwest branch of the same ridge down to the col. He had no trail to follow because of recent storm snow, and so traversed back and forth while descending, trying to find a way through the icefall. He did not go far enough down the ridge to find the traverse ramp, and was forced to bivouac at an elevation over 3000 meters, exposed to wind and snow overnight, with only a light nylon sack for protection.

When he failed to return on September 27, wardens became concerned, and proceeded at 1300 to search the mountain. By that time, the climber was severely hypothermic and unable to move, but he was able to wave his hand. The helicopter was prevented from landing by wind and poor visibility, so wardens were slung in under it to evacuate him. The pilot did a masterful flying performance in extremely poor conditions during the rescue. Paramedics who attended the victim estimate that he was within a half hour of death by hypothermia.

Analysis

Although the climber was experienced, he did not research the mountain adequately, and so became stymied when bad weather prevented him from seeing where to go. Had he known about the A-A Col descent route, or the correct line of the standard route, he might have gotten down on his own and in good time, even in bad weather. In any case, soloing on a glacier is hazardous. Many people have fallen into deep crevasses on Mount Athabasca. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service)

RAPPEL ERROR—INCORRECT USE OF EQUIPMENT

Alberta, Smith-Dorrien Valley, Ranger Creek

At 1630 on November 9, authorities at Peter Lougheed Provincial Park received a radio call from M.P., who was at the scene of a rappelling accident on an ice climb on Mount Murray.

After a day of top-roping from a substantial anchor on an ice smear to the north of the R&D route in Ranger Creek, M.D. (36) had removed the carabiners from the top slings and threaded the climbing rope through two Abalakov loops before being lowered to the base by his belayer. During lowering, the climbing rope cut through the slings and M.D. fell to the bottom, sustaining extensive injuries: a broken femur, neck fractures, broken pelvis, a large puncture cut in the left knee, a compression fracture of the lower back and assorted cuts. He was in serious shock.

Park rangers drove to Ranger Creek, while a helicopter was dispatched from Canmore