

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Fifty-Third Annual Report of the Safety Committees of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

Canada: Many thanks to Rod Plasman for compiling last year's accident information.

The number of accidents that occurred in 1999 was average in comparison to previous years. There was a noticeable increase in the number of accidents that occurred while individuals were either climbing alone or climbing unroped. The consequences of these accidents were severe—three deaths, some amputated fingers, and one person with both legs broken. There was also a marked increase in the number of accidents that occurred on snow and ice. This could possibly be attributed to the poor conditions found on many alpine climbs due to the generally cold and wet summer in western Canada.

There was one fatal rock climbing accident that occurred as a result of the climbers going off route. Climbers should note that guidebooks can quickly become outdated when bolt belays replace natural or piton belays. If the new belay is placed five meters to one side of the original, suddenly the directions “go up and right from the belay” can take on a whole new meaning.

There were no accidents reported from the St. Elias area in the Yukon, even though it was one of their busiest seasons on record (46 climbing expeditions with 176 people in total). Poor weather and cold temperatures were reported, so perhaps some of these parties spent more time in their tent than they did climbing.

Thank you to the following people who contributed to the Canadian section of this year's book: Marc Ledwidge, Sylvia Forest, George Field, Lloyd Freese, Ron Harris, Larry Stanier, Derek Holtved, Deborah Boulton, David Henderson, Scott Larson, Darlene Snider, Linda Hillard, Bruce Godlien, Doug Fulford, Jim Racette, Chris Perry, Peter Staszelis, Bonnie Hamilton and the staff at Mount Robson Provincial Park Ranger office.

United States: This was a big year for the category “other” in terms of causes for accidents. There were many variations on familiar themes. Rappel/lowering problems abounded, including short ropes and Gri-Gri brake devices not being understood. There was one accident involving a Gri-Gri that could not be reported on in detail. A climber fell 45 meters to his death in Tettegouche State Park (MN) when the lowering system failed. Any time there is the possibility that equipment may have been part of the cause, we try to include a narrative report. If useful information is forthcoming, we will include it next year.

Most of the “falling rock” problems this year were due to rocks breaking loose when stepped on or grabbed. Some of these may have been prevented by better testing of holds, but most seemed to be a geology problem, including the lack of the climbers understanding the nature of the rock formation. There were a

number of “unable to self-arrest” incidents, often accompanied by misuse of crampons; i.e., wearing crampons when conditions warranted not doing so.

We try to include comments from one or two major climbing areas in this introduction. This year, Jim Detterline, a Longs Peak Ranger, said there were a total of 208 search, rescue, medical, and fatality incidents to which they responded. He pointed out that climbers comprised only 10 percent of these incidents, and he indicated this to be normal and consistent with annual Rocky Mountain National Park climbing accidents. His data reveal that the average is 12 percent over the past 20 years. While there were no climbing fatalities, there were three hiker and two lightning strike deaths.

An important change noted by Detterline is that the Northcutt-Carter Route on Hallett Peak experienced a major rockslide, turning into a 5.11 climb now. He concluded by saying that the rescues needed were generally accomplished with short, inexpensive missions.

Reports were received from some places we have not heard from in a long time, as well as from some new sites. Unfortunately, there were several locations from whom we did not receive information. These include Arizona, Montana, New Hampshire, Devil’s Tower, Devil’s Lake State Park, Zion National Park, Smith Rocks, and Salt Lake City. Still, it is unlikely that climbing fatalities or many serious injuries occurred in these places, because these incidents tend to get forwarded by AAC members who find reports in local newspapers.

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following—with apologies for any omissions—for collecting data and helping with the report: Hank Alicandri, Micki Canfield, Jim Detterline, Renny Jackson, Bill May, Leo Paik, Robert Speik, all individuals who sent personal stories in, and, of course, George Sainsbury.

John E. (Jed) Williamson
Managing Editor
7 River Ridge Road
Hanover, NH 03755
e-mail: jedwmsn@sover.net

Nancy Hansen
Canadian Editor
Box 8040
Canmore, Alberta T1W 2T8
e-mail: nhansen@telusplanet.net