

CANADA

FALLING ICE, POOR POSITION

Alberta, Banff National Park, Mount Wilson, Ice Nine

On January 24 a party of three had begun the first of pitch Ice Nine, a water ice Grade 6 route. One climber was leading, one was belaying from behind the curtain of the first pitch and the third climber was sitting on her pack watching the leader climb. When the leader was about ten meters up the pitch, a large hanging piece to the right of the route fell. It is estimated that this piece was about 36 cubic meters. The piece missed the belayer but hit the climber who was watching the leader. The main piece of ice hardly broke up and buried the climber under one meter of ice. She sustained severe crushing injuries. The two other climbers were unable to dig her out. They reached the highway in about ten minutes and flagged down a park snowplow operator who reported the incident to park dispatch immediately. Warden service rescue crews responded by ground and helicopter. It took over an hour to dig the victim out from under the solid ice using pneumatic hammers and picks.

Analysis

Falling ice is a major objective hazard in waterfall ice climbing. Overnight temperatures had been -25°C . However, it was a sunny day and the southern exposure of the route resulted in significant radiation effect. Unfortunately, the victim was standing directly underneath the hanging ice curtain. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service)

OFF ROUTE, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, CLIMBING ALONE, WEATHER, INEXPERIENCE

Alberta, Jasper National Park, Columbia Icefield, Mount Snowdome

J.R. (28) hitchhiked to the Columbia Icefields on February 20, and hiked to the base of the difficult and hazardous alpine ice route "Slipstream" later that day. At 0400 on February 21, J.R. started climbing. Conditions were good, and he reached the top of the route four or five hours later. Although he started the climb in good weather, when he reached the top, he was in a blizzard. Because he was climbing alone, he had planned on taking a rarely used descent route which avoided the heavily crevassed areas of the normal descent. Poor weather and darkness prevented him from finding the correct gully. He tried several gullies only to discover that he was at the top of cliffs too high for his rappel rope. Since J.R. had no bivouac gear or stove, he continued moving all night. At some point during his many ascents and descents, J.R. realized that his hands were badly frostbitten from holding the metal ice tools with soggy mitts. On the morning of February 22, he found a gully that brought him down to the Athabasca Glacier and he hiked out to the highway by 1600 hours. He then flagged down a passing motorist and was driven to the Mineral Springs Hospital in Banff. J.R. was treated for frostbite to all 10 fingers and other parts of his hands. He eventually had to get several of his finger tips amputated due to the severe frostbite.

In the meantime, J.R. was reported overdue by his roommate at 1000 on February 22. Details were sketchy about his destination; all that R.P. knew was that his roommate had gone to the Icefields, and possibly to Mt. Snowdome. Upon further investigation, it was determined that J.R. was likely attempting Slipstream. J.R. left a note with R.P., saying that if he was not back on Monday that something had gone wrong. J.R. was a very skilled ice climber with minimal winter mountaineering experience.

Wardens initiated an investigation, which included a ground search party skiing towards the base of Slipstream, and a helicopter response. The search party found no evidence of human activity, however visibility was poor due to high winds, blowing snow and obscured skies. The helicopter was on standby waiting for suitable flying conditions. By 1700, the helicopter was still grounded. At 0200 on February 23, R.P. called wardens to inform them J.R. had returned home, and was in the hospital with frostbite.

Analysis

Soloing has become increasingly popular, but there are several hazards that go along with it, aside from the obvious lack of belay capabilities. Most notably, the summit of Snowdome, as well as the lower glaciers, is riddled with crevasses, making unroped travel hazardous. The probability of staying healthy on the Columbia Icefields in bad weather with no bivouac gear is considerably reduced when alone. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service, victim)

FALLING ICE, FALL ON ICE

Alberta, Banff National Park, Mount Wilson, Oh Le Tabernac

On March 17 the lead climber of a party of two was ten meters up the first pitch of Oh Le Tabernac, a water ice Grade 5+ route. He was just above his second screw when he heard a cracking noise. He told his belayer about it just as the ice he was standing on broke free. A ten by three-meter piece broke off and he crashed to the ground sustaining multiple fractures and serious head trauma. His partner stabilized him and ran to the road to get help. He was evacuated by heli-sling by a warden service rescue crew, flown to the Banff hospital, and then flown to Calgary. He died a few days later from his injuries.

Analysis

This route usually has a horizontal crack across it due to the detached nature of the pillar. Although many climbers comment on this feature, this is the first serious accident resulting from it. It is unclear how much ice fell on the victim, but given his injuries, it is likely that he was hit by the large piece which broke free. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service)

CORNICE FAILURE

Alberta, Jasper National Park, Columbia Icefield, Mount Andromeda

At approximately 0230 on May 30, two climbers (22 and 23) departed the climbers' parking lot to ascend the Skyladder route on Mount Andromeda. Later that morning, they overtook another climbing party of three from Seattle near