

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

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

This is the fifty-fourth issue of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* and the twenty-third issue in which The Alpine Club of Canada has contributed data and narratives.

Canada: This was a year in which an unusually high number of experienced climbers were involved in serious accidents in Canada. Many of these were preventable, but some were situations in which the only thing the person could have done differently was to stay at home and read a book. These accidents are reminders that not all risks in climbing can be eliminated, even by the most seasoned individuals.

The accidents that could have been prevented, and can therefore be learned from, include; solo climbing, climbing in poor conditions, using inadequate belay and rappel stations, and using poor judgment in route selection based on unfavorable conditions or ability.

There was a marked increase in the number of rescues that were initiated by cellular phone calls this year. It is unclear if this was due to improved cell phone reception or to an increase in the number of climbers taking phones with them on their climbs. Whatever the reason, use of cell phones generally resulted in much faster rescue times.

We would like to express our gratitude to the following individuals who contributed to the Canadian section of this year's book: Marc Ledwidge, Lisa Paulson, Burke Duncan, Ron Harris, David Henderson, Sonia Woolford, Josh Briggs, Mike Haden, Doug Fulford, Joanne Hansen, Diana MacGibbon, Sarah Cassidy, Greg Heide, Val Fraser, Michel Bolduc, Jonathan Fischer, Murray Toft and Helen Sovdat. Thanks also to those who fortunately either had nothing to report or who provided information that was not included in this year's book.

United States: The number of fatalities for this year—24—is nearly equal to the average number of same for the past decade. The number of accidents reported—150—is ten higher than the average for this same time period. Whether this is bad news or not depends upon several factors. We can assume there has been an increase in the number of people climbing and climber days, but this is a difficult number to determine. One area from which we received many reports this year—18—was Mount Shasta, which brought the California total much higher than in previous years. The unfortunate thing about these reports, over half of which involved sliding down snow out of control, is that nearly all the individuals were new to climbing—and some did not even have appropriate climbing equipment. We'll be paying close attention to this area,

as it is obviously attracting people to attempt ascents. Its access, like Mount Hood and Mount Washington, as well as “roadside attractions” like Joshua Tree, can mean that non-climbers become part of our data and narratives, perhaps leading cursory readers to the wrong conclusions about the levels of risk and danger in the sport.

A continuing issue is the value of wearing a helmet while climbing. The basic purpose is to protect climbers from falling rocks and objects. In recent years, helmet designers have paid attention to side-impact in order to make helmets more useful in falls that result in head contact with the rock. Over the years, the number of rock climbing accidents in which climbers have had head impact on rock and are seriously or fatally injured is few. Most head impacts have occurred when the climber falls to the deck—and tumbles. In one of these cases this year (see the Mohonk Preserve report), a veteran climber assures us that a helmet saved his life—or at least his mental and physical functioning. On artificial climbing walls, helmets are not seen as a necessary item. To date, we have heard of no serious or fatal head injuries occurring on these venues.

There is certainly an increase in the number of incidents that occur when climbers use the “sling-shot” belay/lowering system. Misjudgements in rope length, how quickly speed can build up, weight ratios, and anchoring systems abound. From reading some of these mishaps, I am reminded of perfectly intelligent people trying to stuff a two-foot by three-foot bag into the overhead compartment on an airplane. Defies all logic.

Again we had some areas not reporting in this year, including Maine, Eldorado Canyon, and Smith Rock. Some individual reports came forward from these locations, but we could use help! A paragraph summary of New Hampshire accidents didn’t provide enough detail for data or narratives.

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, Ron Cloud, Jim Detterline, Mark Magnuson, Bill May, Leo Paik, Robert Speik, all individuals who sent in personal stories, 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