

FALL ON ICE, PROTECTION PULLED OUT—ICE TOOL

Alberta, Banff National Park, Professor Falls,

On March 10 at 1130, T.M. was leading the last pitch of Professor Falls (III WI4). She was having some difficulty placing a screw due to the brittle nature of the ice and clipped the rope into her tool to rest. She was a little over ten meters above her last piece. When she weighted the rope to rest, her tool pulled. She fell 25 meters and broke her right ankle in the fall. Her partner, R.H., lowered her to the bottom of the pitch and improvised a splint for her leg. Because her pack with extra clothes, food, ensolite and thermos was down at the bottom of the next pitch, the party took some time to lower and rappel down to that point before R.H. left to get help. T.M. was later evacuated by heli-sling by Warden Service rescue crews. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service, Marc Ledwidge)

FALL THROUGH CORNICE, OFF ROUTE, UNROPED

Alberta, Banff National Park, Mount Balfour

On April 12, N.F., a ski patroller from Whistler and member of the ACC Whistler section, was skiing the Wapta Icefield traverse with two companions, D.S. and G.M. They were equipped with a copy of Murray Toft's Wapta Traverse composite topo map and compasses. They had conversed with guides at one of the huts who had informed them that the snowpack was large this year. The visibility over the previous few days had been intermittent with some whiteout conditions. They had had no trouble with crevasses on the traverse. When they reached the Balfour Hut, they were joined by another party of two, S.F. and E.N., who were equipped with a GPS, compasses and an emergency radio. The two groups decided to combine forces on the ascent over the Balfour High Col to the Scott Duncan Hut.

They were skiing roped up in two teams. The skiers were using a Rutschblock cord tied to their ski poles and flicking it ahead of them to assist in defining the changes in the terrain. They periodically checked their bearings by compass and GPS and switched leaders. At one point N.F. believed that the group had veered too far left and corrected their course. As the group climbed toward the Col, visibility was initially quite reasonable and no worse than on previous days. As the group approached what they believed was the Col, the visibility dropped sharply. They were actually off-route to the extreme left edge of the traverse at this point.

The group checked their bearings by GPS and decided to unrope for the descent, as they felt they were beyond the obvious crevasses and could navigate reasonably well. They also removed their skins and Rutschblock cords and were having to travel shoulder to shoulder at that point in order to keep track of each other in the whiteout conditions. Each member was using a compass and/or GPS. N.F. was using a compass. His closest companion, G.M., noticed that he pushed off a couple times and then took a reading on his compass. He skied off away from the group, slightly to the left. It was at that moment, when N.F. was about 20 to 25 feet away, that

N.F. disappeared. N.F.'s companion was clearly also very close to the edge. G.M. believed that N.F. had skied over a wind lip. He skied toward N.F. but was warned by another member of the party to get back from the edge. It was then that they realized that he had gone over a cliff. When N.F. did not reappear, his companions shouted loudly, but received no response. Visibility improved slightly and they set up a rappel and looked over the edge. They realized the seriousness of the drop and could not see N.F. They attempted to use the radio on a number of occasions over the next few hours to report the accident but were unable to make contact with anyone. They attempted to rappel onto the slope from the Col but due to cornice conditions and the difficulty of reversing the rappel they aborted this attempt. They made a number of other attempts to get to N.F. by various routes. S.F. had the most first aid training, and he entered the slope from the south where it was marginally safer and made his way to N.F., about two hours after the fall. S.F. determined that there was nothing that he could do to assist N.F.

It was obvious from the laceration that N.F. had fallen directly on his head. There was a fair amount of blood loss from this injury. When S.F. reached N.F., he was not breathing, was cyanotic, and had no carotid pulse. (As a side note, S.F. had set off at least two avalanches in his approach to N.F. and thus chose to exit to the north of the Col, which took him through an icefall, which he then crossed solo.) One of the group skied part of the way down to him so that they could come back through the crevasses roped up. The group spent the night at the Scott Duncan Hut, where they again attempted unsuccessfully to call for help on the radio. The following day they exited at West Louise Lodge and reported the incident to the RCMP. Storm and whiteout conditions continued for seven more days. N.F.'s body was recovered by a team of Parks Canada Wardens from Lake Louise and flown out by helicopter on April 19. N.F. was buried in 80 cm of snow but his companions had taken a reading on his location. He was wearing a transceiver which made it possible to locate him very quickly.

Analysis

Whiteout conditions at the Balfour High Col are fairly common, and this is the second such incident at this precise location. The decision to unrope in good visibility at this point is common, as most of the crevasses on the way to the Neil Colgan Hut can be avoided. Since the party was not familiar with the terrain in good visibility, they likely underestimated the cornices and steep terrain to their left. The main error was in failing to remain roped up and utilize proper glacier travel techniques. The recommended way to travel on glaciers is to rope up as the "default" position. Exceptions can be made, but being in a whiteout, in unfamiliar terrain, is not one of the exceptions. Worse yet, we seem to be seeing people using "not roping up" as the default position and roping up when they sense an exception, which in turn gives "human error" an even greater chance of success.

Ski mountaineers traveling the Wapta traverse should be equipped with a compass, topo map and GPS where possible. Having a pre-marked route

plan is important as well, as it is easy to make errors in navigation in difficult conditions. (Source: Greg McDonnell, Parks Canada Warden Service, Gord Irwin, Edwina Podemski)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION FAILED—ROCK BLOCK, FAILURE TO TEST HOLD

Alberta, Jasper National Park, Hidden Valley

On May 19, Peter R. (49) and Jack W. were climbing a single pitch route in Hidden Valley, a quiet climbing area east of Jasper. While leading, Peter decided to sling a large block to use as protection. When weighted, the block pulled out and Peter fell about 20 feet onto a scree slope, tumbling down to a point level with his belayer. His first piece of protection prevented him from falling any further; however, the large block fell on and crushed his right ankle. After making him as comfortable as he could, his partner ran down to the road, 40 minutes away, and phoned Parks emergency dispatch. Park Wardens responded on foot to the accident scene, where they stabilized the patient and splinted his foot. Another Warden and a Jasper Medic flew into the scene and evacuated the injured climber by helicopter sling rescue to an ambulance waiting at the road.

Analysis

Rock quality in this part of the world can be quite suspect at times, especially on climbs that do not receive a high traffic volume. There is ample shattered limestone at the bottom of a number of the routes in Hidden Valley to provide clues about the rock quality in the area. Climbers would do well to visually inspect chosen natural protection carefully before weighting it. (Source: Parks Canada Warden Service, Jim Mamalis, Edwina Podemski)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE BELAY, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

Alberta, Jasper National Park, Morro Slabs

On June 22, a family group and friends were climbing at Morro Slabs, a low angle practice area near the road, east of Jasper, Alberta. The group was being supervised by the father of the accident victim. Some of the party were climbing on top-ropes, while others were practicing rappelling. One of the rappellers, Jacob (20), who was relatively inexperienced, was being belayed from the top of the climb on a separate line by a friend, who was using a figure 8 on his harness. The belayer was positioned between the cliff edge and the rappel anchor, but was not tied in to the anchor and did not have a helmet or shoes on. The rappeller was descending too quickly for the belayer to keep up, so he was pulled off the top of the slab and over the edge of the climb. He fell 60 feet to the base of the slabs.

The accident was witnessed by a passing motorist, who phoned into the Parks dispatch. Wardens quickly hiked into the site and stabilized the patient, who had suffered minor lumbar spine injuries and various scrapes and bruises. More wardens flew in by helicopter and evacuated the patient via helicopter sling rescue system to the road.