

Latham, Mountaineering Ranger and Denali National Park and Preserve News Report)

HAPE and HACE, ASCENDING TOO FAST

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Buttress

After a rapid ascent to 14,200 foot camp on the West Buttress, a member of the “Polish Female Denali 2010” expedition, Zygmunt Berdychowski (49), began experiencing signs and symptoms of both High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE) and High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE).

On the morning of May 24 at 0700, Dariusz Stolarczyk, the expedition team leader, woke up hearing irregular respiratory sounds and recognized signs of an altered mental status from Berdychowski. At 0900 Stolarczyk approached the NPS Rangers requesting assistance for his team member. Due to Berdychowski’s inability to walk unassisted, Ranger Brandon Latham, VIP Scott Ring and VIP Sam Piper moved Berdychowski in a litter to the medical tent at 14,200-foot Ranger Camp. Berdychowski was treated at the medical tent and evacuated on the NPS helicopter to basecamp and then accompanied by a VIP paramedic to Talkeetna on a commercial fixed wing aircraft. He was released at that point.

Analysis

The primary issue with this incident is the time the expedition took to ascend to 14,200 feet. By using the old mountaineering philosophy of “Climb High, Sleep Low,” it would take a recommended five to seven days to ascend to 14,200 feet. Climbers who follow this philosophy may still experience symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), HAPE or HACE, but it is more likely to happen to those who choose a more rapid ascent. Berdychowski may have been able to increase his chances for proper acclimatization and avoid the need to be evacuated if his team had planned a slower ascent up to 14,200 feet. (Source: Brandon Latham, Mountaineering Ranger)

FALL ON ROCK, CLIMBING ALONE and UNROPED, PLACED NO PROTECTION

Alaska, Mount McKinley, West Rib

On May 26, solo climber Luc Benoit (40) sustained an un-roped fall of approximately 1000 feet down the West Rib. The next day Ranger Tucker Chenoweth flew with pilot Andy Hermansky in the contract A-star B3 helicopter 3AE to the scene and picked up the climber using a toe-in landing. Benoit was assessed at basecamp by a Park Service volunteer physician, flown to Talkeetna and released from NPS care.

Luc Benoit came to Denali with the intention of climbing the West Rib solo. This was his third attempt at the route with previous experience as a client of a guide service in 2006 and another try with a partner in 2009. He reached the summit of Denali via the West Buttress in 2009, but had never

previously set foot on the lower West Rib. Before arriving in Alaska, Benoit had climbed solo in Bolivia on peaks above 20,000 feet. He intended to use these climbs to acclimatize for Denali.

After flying into basecamp on the Kahiltna glacier on May 22, Benoit moved up the lower West Rib according to his planned schedule. On May 26, Benoit left his highest camp at the top of the couloir, following footprints towards the “Upper West Rib camp.” He reported snowy conditions to the first bergschrund, then reported that conditions got icy. He decided to climb through a mixed rock section. While attempting this, his ice ax “lost its grip” on the rock and he fell over backwards onto the “50–55-degree” slope. He rolled and slid on the snow between rocks then onto a snow slope, passing over the bergschrund. He came to rest in a sitting position, “face up in the direction of the mountain.” When he tried to move, he noticed pain in his right shoulder. He also found that his tent and ice ax were lost in the fall. He descended to the couloir camp, dug a trench for shelter, and went to sleep for the night. Around 0800 on May 27, he called for Ranger assistance with his FRS radio and reached Ranger Tucker Chenoweth at basecamp.

Benoit was flown to basecamp, where a physician assessed him, finding injuries to his shoulder and ankle. Benoit then joined Ranger Dave Weber on a K2 flight back to Talkeetna. He refused additional medical care or transfer.

Analysis

Solo climbing always carries greater inherent risks and requires a much higher level of self-sufficiency. The West Rib route has significant objective hazard with a highly crevassed approach up the Northeast fork of the Kahiltna glacier as well as steep technical climbing with the possibility of very large falls. Most climbing parties use running protection on the steeper slopes starting at the main couloir at the base of the West Rib. Given the conditions present on May 26, snow pickets, ice screws, and rock protection would have been standard accepted practice to climb the route with a roped group. Solo climbing makes placing protection and self-belaying much more difficult, to the point where it would be nearly impossible to protect the route in the event of falls.

All climbing requires constant risk assessment in relation to the climber’s ability and comfort level. It is common for solo climbers to set up ropes on steep and technical portions of climbs. If solo climbers choose to travel unroped, they risk being killed in the event of any slip or fall. (Source: Kevin Wright, Mountaineering Ranger)

AVALANCHE

Alaska, Denali National Park, Werewolf/Hut Towers, Freezy Nuts

On May 24, four members of an expedition were flown on to the Ruth Glacier with the intent to climb several surrounding snow and ice routes. Weather