

Mount Shasta Wilderness

2024 Search & Rescue Incident Narratives

04.27.2024 – Rescue - Avalanche Gulch - Avalanche

On Saturday, April 27th at approximately 12:30pm in whiteout conditions, two experienced climbers very familiar with Mount Shasta (Tanner Schaefer and Parker Smith) were ascending left of The Heart in upper Avalanche Gulch on Mount Shasta when they triggered a wind slab avalanche at approximately 13,000 feet. The mountain had not received significant new snow, but northwesterly wind was active. Both were caught in the avalanche, but not buried. Spaced about 20 feet apart, the higher climber (Tanner) arrested his fall near the top of the slab, while the lower climber (Parker) was caught and carried approximately 1,000 vertical feet down slope. Once the avalanche came to rest, Tanner realized a knee injury, though was able to sideslip down on his snowboard to Parker, who had sustained a broken femur and large puncture and laceration to the lower leg and ribs. Attempts were made to descend, but the pain proved to be too much and the pair opted to wait for rescue at 12,200 feet. They called 911 at this time.

Siskiyou County SAR, USFS Climbing Rangers and a California Highway Patrol began responding immediately after the incident occurred. Conditions for helicopter use were poor due to whiteout visibility above treeline. Aerial evacuation was attempted, but it soon became obvious that ground transport of Parker was the only option due to weather conditions. The helicopter was able to insert 2 rescuers to treeline (~8,000 feet), but not higher. Still, a several hour climb in whiteout conditions was necessary to reach the party. Numerous outfitter mountain guides, on the mountain already for guide training, also began to respond up Avalanche Gulch to support the effort.

USFS Climbing Rangers arrived at the scene, packaged Parker and began a long, arduous ground evacuation from 12,200 feet, down Avalanche Gulch, back to Bunny Flat trailhead at 6,950 feet, a distance of about 4 miles. California Highway Patrol air resources attempted rescue again later in the day, but were unable to provide aid in the poor weather conditions. Numerous outfitter guides and SAR personnel made their way up the mountain to aid the rescue effort. All slowly made their way down the mountain. A big thanks to Shasta Mountain Guides for their crucial help in this rescue.

Both climbers made it safely off the mountain by midnight. Thank you to all that were involved. Without helicopter evacuation, this is a good example of the time and effort required to execute a rescue on Mount Shasta, despite being 15 minutes off the interstate.

Climbing in limited visibility conditions always makes for more risk should something go wrong.

Siskiyou County Sheriff's Press Release:

PRESS RELEASE

At 12:21 pm, on Saturday, April 27th, the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) Dispatchers received a 911 call from a climber on Mount Shasta who was stranded at 12,200 feet with a broken femur, after narrowly surviving an avalanche a few moments before. The climber explained that he and his climbing partner had intended to summit Mount Shasta and snowboard down the Avalanche Gulch route, but triggered a wind slab avalanche at 13,000 feet. The climber's partner had managed to avoid being swept down the mountain, but injured his knee in the process.

SCSO Dispatchers notified the US Forest Service (USFS) Climbing Rangers of the incident, and requested assistance from California Highway Patrol's (CHP) Air Operations to attempt to extract the two men. However, strong winds and poor visibility inhibited the helicopter's ability to safely land near the climbers, so the SCSO Search and Rescue (SAR) Team mobilized, along with USFS Climbing Rangers and a group of professional mountain guide volunteers, to begin an extraction operation on foot.

While the ground team made their way up the mountain, CHP helicopters managed to take advantage of a brief weather window and delivered USFS Rangers and SAR team members to an area near treeline, 3,500 vertical feet below the injured climbers. Rescuers reached the injured men at approximately 6:20 pm, and began treating them for their injuries. The climber with the injured femur was by this time exhibiting signs of frostbite and hypothermia and required a highly technical evacuation down the mountain, while the climber with the injured knee was eventually able to self-rescue and snowboard back to Bunny Flats trailhead. Over the next four hours, the rescue team descended the remaining 6,000 feet and reached Bunny Flats trailhead by midnight. Thankfully, both men survived, and no members of the rescue party were injured during the operation.

It is worth noting that the two climbers caught in the April 27 avalanche were highly skilled mountaineers with extensive experience on Mount Shasta. Still, the men found themselves on a wind-loaded aspect that gave way, and carried one of them 1,000 feet down Avalanche Gulch. Their ordeal, and the 11-hour rescue process that followed, are reminders that no amount of experience makes one immune to the hazards encountered on Mount Shasta, and that ever-changing mountain conditions can turn a rapid-extraction operation into a time and resource-intensive process.

The Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office would like to thank the USFS Climbing Rangers for their swift and skillful response during this incident, along with California Highway Patrol, Mount Shasta Ambulance, outfitter mountain guides, and our dedicated SAR team.

05.03.2024 – Rescue - Avalanche Gulch/Casaval Ridge - Avalanche

On Friday, May 3 at approximately 1030 a solo climber ascending Casaval Ridge ventured off route traversing onto a south - southeast slope approximately 1,000 vertical feet above Olberman's upper moraine in Avalanche Gulch. The climber triggered and was caught in a wind slab avalanche, the slope loaded earlier from winds out of the northwest. Injuries included a crampon puncture to the leg and an unconfirmed fracture in the lower leg and/or ankle from trauma sustained while tumbling with crampons.

California Highway Patrol (CHP) and the US Forest Service responded to the incident. Climbing ranger, Hayden MacArthur, was on patrol for the day on the south side of the mountain. Lead ranger, Nick Meyers, contacted Hayden at 1040, reporting an injured climber near 11,000 feet in Avalanche Gulch with CHP helicopter responding. MacArthur proceeded to establish contact with CHP. Given calm and clear flying conditions, MacArthur was picked up from Bunny Flat and inserted at the patient site.

The patient was found awake, sitting in a semi upright position and supported by his pack. Three other climber and skiers were also present but not affiliated with the individual, at least one of whom had witnessed the avalanche and the accident. The patient was in visible discomfort from his injuries. A decision was made to evacuate the patient via hot seat to Mercy Medical. The rescue was completed at approximately 1300. This avalanche occurred on the same aspect and elevation as the Tanner and Parker incident, six days prior.

05.17.2024 – Fatality Rescue/Recovery - Avalanche Gulch – Medical

On Friday, May 17 at approximately 1900, USFS Mt Shasta Climbing Rangers were notified of a medical incident at 9,800 feet in Avalanche Gulch. CPR was reported in progress by the patient's climbing partner. Three USFS climbing rangers responded to Bunny Flat in preparation for California Highway Patrol helicopter assist. Due to the time of day and decreasing sunlight, the CHP helicopter was unable to assist with the rescue. Two Rangers responded on snowmobiles, arriving on scene at 1945.

Upon arrival, CPR was still in progress, having started 45 minutes prior. Rangers relieved the patient's partner and continued medical care for 15 minutes. Rangers ceased medical care due to the obvious signs of death, and no marked improvement of the patient. Rangers packaged the patient in a toboggan and extricated the body back to Bunny Flat. All

involved arrived to Bunny Flat at approximately 2355. A Siskiyou County Sheriff's Deputy met Rangers in the parking lot, and declared the patient deceased by 2400.

05.26.2024 – Rescue - Avalanche Gulch – Rockfall

Over the Memorial Day weekend and shortly before 0915 on Sunday, May 26 a solo middle-aged (51) male climber descending the Avalanche Gulch route on the south side of Mount Shasta was struck by a fist sized rock near ~11,500'. The rock originated from the Red Banks or Trinity Chutes. The rock impacted the right side of the climber's helmet and penetrated one of the vents, delivering a laceration and minor skull fracture, in addition to a concussion.

At the time of the incident, climbing ranger Hayden MacArthur was ascending the route a couple hundred feet above the individual and witnessed the entire event. Following impact, the climber fell and slid a hundred feet on the firm snow surface. A climber in a separate group promptly applied a compression bandage to stop the bleeding from the open head wound.

Upon MacArthur's arrival on scene, the patient was mostly alert, but had trouble recalling the event. He also had trouble recalling his spouse's name when requesting she be notified of the accident. Initially the patient felt confident he could descend, but upon helping him to his feet, could not support his weight. While the patient remained alert, his overall energy levels and mental stamina decreased over the course of the rescue. He also developed a severe headache and nausea.

Given the TBI symptoms and favorable flying conditions, a decision was made to evacuate with a helicopter. Communications were established with California Highway Patrol and a helicopter was dispatched. The patient began to show signs of cold related injury. Insulation and layers were provided to keep warm. The helicopter arrived at 1100 to deliver to Mercy Medical Center for treatment.

06.02.2024 – Public Assist - Avalanche Gulch – Hypothermia

On June 2, 2024 at 1300 hours, an early to mid-twenties climber descending Avalanche Gulch returned to Helen Lake with symptoms of mild hypothermia. Both on duty climbing rangers, Eric Falconer and Hayden MacArthur, were notified of the individual's condition by his two climbing partners and responded to provide support.

Primary symptoms included shivering and intense physical and mental discomfort. Temperatures on this day were cold on the upper mountain, with strong wind out of the west and intermittent rain. Clouds built through the morning, with the ceiling dropping below Helen Lake (10,400 feet) by early afternoon.

The climber was found in his tent and sleeping bag soaked in his wet layers. These were removed, and the patient bundled with dry sleeping bags. Minor abrasions sustained from sliding on the firm snow surfaces were bandaged. Hot water bottles were inserted into his sleeping bag, and the climber encouraged to eat and drink. Rangers took shifts lying adjacent to the individual as an additional source of heat. Symptoms gradually improved over the course of a couple of hours. The patient and his partners began to descend sometime after 1500 successfully self-evacuating around 1700 when they arrived at Bunny Flats. This rescue was completed as a public assist with no involvement from 911 or official SAR response.

Environmental factors contributing to the hypothermic condition of the climber included cold temperatures, strong wind and intermittent precipitation. Human factors contributing to the incident included poor equipment choices and other general knowledge regarding safe recreation in a mountain environment. Specific examples include lack of a durable hardshell layer. The climber also utilized microspikes in place of crampons, a decision which likely contributed to the slips and falls which saturated his clothing. Other observations included an overall lack of dry clothing to provide insulation and retain body heat. More generally, the lack of adequate trip preparation for the conditions encountered was the primary contributing factor.

6.16.24 - Rescue - Avalanche Gulch - Glissading

On the afternoon of June 16th, a climber (50's) in a party of four was glissading down Avalanche Gulch near The Heart, with an ice axe and without crampons. The climber lost control of his speed and took a subsequent ~200 foot tumble on firm snow, sustaining an ankle fracture and head/face lacerations. The party called 911.

Siskiyou County SAR, USFS Climbing Rangers and California Highway Patrol helicopter resources were notified and dispatched. A cloud deck limited aerial resources above ~9,500 feet. USFS Climbing Rangers were inserted via helicopter to 50/50 Flat and climbed to the injured party above Helen Lake, approximately 11,500 feet. Climbing rangers splinted his right ankle, wrapped the patient to prevent hypothermia and packaged with a SKED and vacuum mattress. It was a cold and windy day with light graupel at times. The climber was manually lowered to 50/50, below the cloud deck, where a CHP helicopter was able to load the patient and transport off the mountain.

6.24.24 - Rescue – Hotlum/Bolam Route - Unprepared/Exhaustion/Exposure

At 7:33am on June 24, 2024, US Forest Service climbing ranger Nick Meyers received notification from Siskiyou County Search and Rescue coordinator Aaron Jacobsen: “Hey Nick, got sort of an odd one for ya today, guy claims he’s been on the peak of Mt Shasta for days with no food or water, eating only ice to survive, says he has built a rock shelter...coordinates 41.410185, -122.195391, wearing a camo jacket, blue jean pants and black boots...”. This was the only information provided. Attempts were made to phone the reporting party for more information, to no avail. The coordinates placed the climber on the north summit of Mount Shasta, very close to the true summit, at an elevation of ~14,170 feet.

Meyers and Jacobsen agreed that an aerial recon over the coordinate location would be prudent as a start to the rescue. Physical injuries were not suspected, but extreme dehydration, exhaustion and exposure were the primary emergencies anticipated. Jacobsen requested the frequently utilized California Highway Patrol (CHP) helicopter out of Redding, California. At 9:39am, CHP H-14 was able to spot the climber near the summit. They landed on the nearby summit plateau, loaded the climber into the helicopter and transported back to Mercy Hospital in Mt Shasta without further incident. The 30-year-old patient (Daniel) was uninjured but dehydrated and exhausted. He denied medical treatment, but added to the situation by saying, “By the way, I left my partner (Jack) at 12,500 feet on the Hotlum-Bolam route...”. This information was unknown until now.

The CHP helicopter along with USFS climbing ranger Meyers, struck out for the north side of the mountain for aerial search of Jack, who was in Daniel’s words, “...old, obese, blind in one eye and can’t see well out of the other, but a tough old bastard.” Initially, the search was unable to locate Jack. A refuel and second round of searching ensued. At 11:51am, a man fitting his description was spotted from the air at 13,000 feet on The Step, a relatively flat portion of the Hotlum-Bolam ridge route. The man was laying face down, in the fetal position and not moving, despite several low flyovers from the helicopter. Meyers, the pilot, and medic presumed he was dead. A nearby landing zone was utilized to land H-14. Meyers and the CHP medic exited the helicopter and walked several hundred yards to assess the climber. Meyers approached first and began shouting, “Jack, Jack...” while clapping his hands. No response. Meyers then reached down and gave him a shake. A short pause, and then suddenly, like out of a movie, Jack slowly lifted his head and turned toward the startled Meyers, “Do you have any water?”. Jack was barely able to speak, but still wanted to climb to the top, “...to see Saint Germain”, and complete his spiritual quest. Meyers and the CHP medic assisted Jack, barely able to walk, to the waiting helicopter and safely returned back to Mercy Hospital in Mt Shasta where Jack received medical evaluation, 12:41pm. This concluded the search and rescue.

...The backstory... Daniel (30) and Jack aka “Odin” (70) are new friends. They only met a few days before their climb. Daniel found Jack hitchhiking along the Everett Memorial Highway, and picked him up. They started talking and had a common thread between them: both desired to seek a vision of Saint Germain and believed it possible by climbing to the top of the mountain. Who is Saint Germain? Give it a search; plenty of internet reading about the legendary “mystic, ascended master, immortal count”.

And thus, the pair of men decided to embark on a spiritual quest, to summit the mountain with the intent of a vision of Saint Germain. As for their trip planning, somehow, they found out, or were told, that the Northgate trailhead was the highest trailhead and shortest route up the mountain. Neither is true. The north side of Mount Shasta hosts the most technical routes on the mountain, in heavily glaciated terrain.

None-the-less, Daniel and Jack drove to the Northgate trailhead on Wednesday, June 19th. They struck out with very little equipment. Jack brought one trekking pole, one water bottle, a light blanket, and fanny pack. Daniel carried a bit more including micro spikes, but the pair had no shelter, sleeping bags or any other standard camping or mountaineering equipment. They ran out of food and water on Friday the 21st. They shared an apple as their last meal. Over the course of 5 days, Daniel reached the north summit of the mountain on the evening of the 23rd, but left Jack (70 years old, blind in one eye and can’t see well in the other) at 12,500 feet along the Hotlum-Bolam route the day prior. Daniel also left his pack and gear further down along the route due to it “weighing him down”. Finally, on Monday morning of June 24th, day six, after an open bivy at 14,170 feet near the summit of Mt Shasta, Daniel called 911 and requested help, and the rescue of both men ensued.

All said and done, both probably experienced a vision of sorts. The pair spent 6 days on the mountain, and went 3 days without food or water. Jack would have likely succumbed to the elements without rescue. Who knows what would have happened to Daniel. An epic adventure to say the least and we are happy for the safe outcome. They are lucky that nighttime low temperatures were mild, and good weather conditions allowed a timely rescue.

7.28.24 – Rescue – Green Butte Ridge – Hiking

Late in the day on July 28th, a female member of a group of hikers injured her ankle while hiking off trail, near treeline along Green Butte Ridge on Mount Shasta. The group was on holiday from Columbia and mostly Spanish speaking so little is known about the MOI. She could not descend on her own. They called 911.

California Highway Patrol helicopter plus one USFS Climbing Ranger successfully hoisted the injured hiker off the mountain.

08.05.2024 – Rescue - Southgate Meadows Trail – Hiking

On August 5, 2024, at approximately 1100, a middle aged (48) female hiker on the South Gate Meadows trail sustained an ankle fracture to the right leg during a slip and fall. Climbing rangers were notified of the incident at 1130. Due to the unavailable helicopter, evacuation was carried out via wheeled litter. Rangers arrived on scene at 1230. In addition to the individual's family, several members of the public and one SAR member were already present. Two of the individuals with medical certifications also helped provide initial support and notes on the patient's condition. Once on scene, rangers stabilized the injury and packaged them in the litter. Additional support was also provided by district fire crew members who helped support the litter during the descent to the trailhead. The rescue was completed at 1330 when the patient was loaded into their car for transport to Mercy Medical Center.