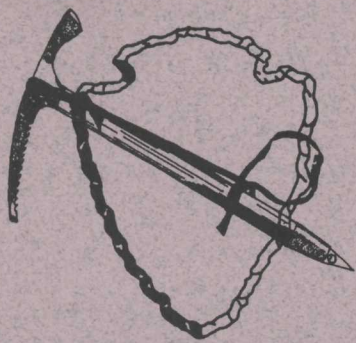




Climbing Notes

1996 Season

North Cascades National Park/Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Summer of '95: Safest in Recent Years

A decline in serious mountaineering accidents at North Cascades National Park continued in 1995. This was the fourth consecutive year no climbing related fatalities occurred. Of the 36 search and rescue operations, only one involved a serious climber injury.

Here are summaries of the two most significant climbing related incidents, followed by a comparative analysis.

July 20-25, Icy Peak: Lost climbers

Two moderately experienced mountaineers completed a Voluntary Climber Register at the Glacier Public Service Center, stating an intent to ascend Icy Peak from the Nooksack Cirque, traverse to Ruth Mountain, and return home the evening of July 21. A search was initiated when they failed to return. On July 25 they were located uninjured on the northeast flank of Icy Peak. The climbers stated they became disoriented while ascending Icy Peak in whiteout conditions. They carried map and compass but were unable to identify landmarks because of poor visibility. They made daily attempts to descend the mountain but quit each effort because of hazards.

July 31, Colonial Peak: Unroped climber fall on rock

A pair of alpinists wandered onto technical terrain while climbing Colonial Peak by the standard West Ridge route. They had ice axes, but not crampons or rope. In attempting to ascend a cliff, one member lost her hold on wet, loose rock. She fell about 50 feet, and was saved from a much longer fall by bouncing into a berschrund. The climber suffered a severe ankle fracture. A difficult rescue operation culminated when the victim was winched aboard a hovering Navy helicopter as darkness and clouds enveloped the mountain. The victim was moderately experienced. Her partner was a novice.

A Comparative Analysis

The circumstances leading to these incidents are similar, but the outcomes are different. Both parties wandered into terrain of greater difficulty than anticipated. Both parties realized they were



not prepared to safely navigate the hazards facing them. The Icy Peak party did not compromise safety, even though this meant days of hunger and discomfort. The Colonial Peak party pushed on. The Icy Peak party survived without injury; the Colonial Peak party suffered a life-threatening injury. The injured climber recommends "in addition to ice axe and helmet, always carry crampons and rope".

Climbing Safety Program Succeeding

The recent decrease in climbing accidents reflects well on the park's climbing safety program. This program was expanded to the current level after the 1991 season. That year, 19 significant incidents resulted in three climbing fatalities and nine injuries. The following winter rangers, deputies, climbers, and Mountain Rescue Association (MRA) members met and identified actions to strengthen existing preventive efforts.

This publication was one result of that meeting. Today the program includes information sharing, regulations, ranger patrols, and a voluntary registration system.

The Wilderness Center in Marblemount serves as the clearinghouse for climbing related

information. Staff conduct backcountry patrols to ensure they are knowledgeable in conditions, and climbing and wilderness rangers rotate into the Center during periods of highest climber visitation. The Center maintains a logbook of route conditions, and a variety of displays related to climbing safety.

Rangers do not certify group competency. Nor is anyone refused backcountry permits because of deficiencies in equipment or ability. Risk is recognized as a legitimate component of the wilderness experience. Our goal is not to eliminate risk, but to help climbers make informed decisions as to their desired level of exposure.

The number of permits issued for areas containing popular routes with objective hazards, such as Boston Basin and the West Ridge of Forbidden, is controlled by regulations.

Summer staff includes two climbing rangers. These rangers monitor route conditions, and contact climbers to stress preparedness, accident prevention, and minimum impact practices.

Optional registration is another program component. See "Banner Year for Voluntary Climber Register" article for more on this system.

The decline in accidents in recent years, combined with the success of individual program components such as the Voluntary Climber Register, reflects the climbing community's commitment to the program's philosophy "Our Concern, Your Responsibility".

Eldorado Restoration Plan Finalized

Last year North Cascades National Park assessed the extent of impacts along the climbers route up Eldorado Creek. The route has developed into a boot path, with over 1,300 feet of tread suffering erosion. A heavily impacted camping area at the upper end has become known as "Hammered Ridge".

The resulting environmental assessment was distributed for public review last fall. Responses supported the park's preferred alternative. This alternative has now been formally selected, with work scheduled to begin this summer.

Continued on page 2

Eldorado Plan *Continued*

The route has three major sections. The lower section travels through forest. The middle portion ascends a talus field. The upper section climbs wet slopes covered with subalpine vegetation. The worst 1,000 feet of the upper section will be rehabilitated. Rutted segments will be filled, erosion stopped, and vegetation planted. Minimal brushing, some grubbing, and placement of cairns will encourage climbers to use a detour more resilient to foot travel. Much of the field work will be done with volunteer help from the Mountaineers Club and individuals.

The combined nightly quota for the adjacent Inspiration Glacier, Eldorado Basin, and Eldorado Glacier crosscountry zones will be reduced from 214 people, to 72 people. At current use levels, this restriction is expected to only inconvenience 1-2 groups per year. While this lower quota won't eliminate current problems, it should low additional impacts.

All persons receiving permits for the area will be given specific information concerning the rehabilitation efforts and be asked to support the work by practicing Leave No Trace (LNT) techniques. Ranger patrols will be increased to enhance these education efforts.

Contact the Wilderness Center for more information on this project or if you'd like to assist with the field work.

+SafeTips+

A review of park mountaineering accidents since 1990 offers the following insights:

- * Many rescues involve leg injuries caused by slipping on non-technical terrain.
- * Constantly track your location using compass, map, and altimeter.
- * Don't place yourself in jeopardy. Turn around, detour, or wait for rescue.
- * A helmet saved one life.
- * The lack of crampons and rope contributed to one serious injury.
- * Voluntary Climber Register information is valuable for SAR responses.

Mt. Baker Accidents

In the past two years four people in three separate incidents have been rescued from a bergschrund at the 5400' elevation on the Coleman climbing route. The site is west of the Hogsback, and is frequented by both climbers and hikers. All the individuals slid into the hole while descending, sustained serious injury, and required helicopter evacuation. The following recommendations reflect the factors which caused these accidents:

- * Glissade only on slopes where you can see the full runoff,
- * Rope up for all glacier travel,
- * Conditions change daily; use good judgement in route selection,
- * Climb within your ability and knowledge.

LNT Lessens Reg's

Leave No Trace (LNT) is a national educational program designed to promote responsible use of recreational lands to the people who enjoy them. The LNT message is coordinated by Leave No Trace, Inc., a non profit organization that unites four federal agencies - the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - with manufacturers, outdoor retailers, user groups, educators, and individuals sharing a commitment to maintain and protect public lands for future enjoyment.

The six Leave No Trace principles are:

- Plan ahead and prepare*
- Camp and travel on durable surfaces*
- Pack it in, pack it out*
- Properly dispose of what you can't pack out*
- Leave what you find*
- Minimize use and impact of fires*

Wide practice of LNT skills minimizes the need for regulations and restrictions. To learn more about these skills, ask for LNT literature at the Wilderness Center and other ranger stations.

Briefly ...

Award

Bellingham resident Sylvia Thorpe was recognized as a "Wilderness Champion" for her long support toward the park's impact restoration program.

Compost Toilets Upgraded

Six of the park's 15 backcountry human waste composter bins were replaced last year. Composter locations frequented by climbers include Boston Basin, Cascade Pass, Sahale Glacier, and Thornton Lakes.

Glaciers Shrinking

For the past three years the park has measured the mass balance of four glaciers: the Noisy, Silver, Sandalee, and North Klawatti. The measurements show an overall loss of volume, although Silver and Sandalee slightly gained in mass in 1995.

SAR Costs

The park spent \$20,586 on SAR incidents in 1995. This doesn't include costs borne by the military, lifeflight helicopters, sheriff departments, and MRA teams.

Vehicle Prowls Down

Only one vehicle larceny was reported in 1995. Lessen your risk by not storing valuables in the car and leaving glove boxes and other containers open.

Wilderness Trip Planner Published

This free brochure is packed with helpful hints for planning a backcountry trip in the park. Available at ranger stations.

Banner Year for Voluntary Climber Register

The *Voluntary Climber Register* is one component of the park's Climbing Safety program. This register gives climbers the option of providing rangers detailed information regarding trip plans and equipment. Completion of the register does not guarantee an emergency response, but the information is very useful should a search be initiated. In recent years information obtained from the register probably saved one life and aided in the prompt resolution of other incidents.

Persons choosing to complete the register promise to avoid unnecessary search efforts by checking-in promptly upon climb completion. In 1995, only nine of the 779 climbing parties participating in the program caused needless search efforts by failing to check-in. Continue this success. If you choose to participate, provide complete and accurate information and don't forget to check-in at a ranger station on the way home.

The program is available to climbers visiting both the park and the national forest. Registers are located at the Wilderness Center in Marblemount, the USFS/NPS offices on State Route 20 in Sedro-Woolley, and at the USFS Public Service Center in Glacier. During business hours the registers are kept at the front desk. They are posted outside at night.

Help Wanted

Heading into a remote area of the park? The Wilderness is inventorying crosscountry impacts and can use your help. Impacts are any evidence of human use, including bivy sites, boot paths, and summit registers. The inventory will serve as a baseline to measure the effects of recreational use on wilderness values, prioritize restoration projects, and assist the park make informed management decisions.

You can help by documenting impacts observed on your climb. To participate, stop by the Wilderness Center in Marblemount prior to your trip to obtain forms with instructions. The forms are easy to complete, and require only a few minutes at each impact. When you return completed forms you will be asked to identify impact locations on a map.