

## Spill on the Hill

As I lay there on my back, left leg immobile, gritting my teeth in pain, my first thought is what just happened couldn't have. Through a tangle of alders I saw a single wispy cloud floating in a deep blue sky, oblivious to the change that had occurred below. Then came the realization I would be in deep trouble if I couldn't crawl out of this steep gully and hike two miles to my car. With less than three hours of daylight remaining, the most treacherous portion of the trail lay ahead. Even if I could get cell phone reception, help wouldn't arrive before dark. I've had close-calls dating back to childhood. The ones that flash through my mind now while trying to relax my leg muscles give me pause; perhaps the least dramatic incident will be the finisher.

As a teenager, I was shot in the chest with an arrow by a neighborhood playmate who was aiming at the tree next to where I was standing. He was sure he had killed me, for he dropped his bow, yelling 'oh no' over and over. He would have been right except that his homemade hunting tip had fallen off in flight. There was the spinout in the Colorado Mountains, riding with my college roommate that would have either smashed the car into a vertical wall or dropped us over a cliff. He braked hard just as the tires caught the only bare strip of asphalt. And then there was the Cook Inlet salmon gillnetting fiasco where there was more than one way that a friend, one of my sons and I wouldn't have returned. However, my greatest escape is likely the outing where Dad and I were surprised by a whipping wind on Lake Louise. If the runabout's convertible top hadn't been up to deflect the oncoming crashing waves over the top and back into the cold water, we'd have been a boating statistic.

Maybe I wasn't going to get off easy this time – if at all.

Although my two friends had made many winter Lazy Mountain climbs, I hadn't. I seriously wanted this goal checked off my bucket list. December hadn't worked out for about as many reasons as it has days. A week earlier Joe, my high school classmate and sometimes climbing partner, and I discovered we both had February 5 available, and the forecast looked unusually good.

I was shocked that morning when Joe called saying his ankle was badly swollen, explaining he had suffered a sudden re-occurrence of gout. Bill, a younger brother of another classmate and the third climber, did not show up for a weekly cribbage game last night, according to Joe, and was out-of-touch this morning. When I wished Joe a quick recovery, he said we'd re-schedule as soon as he was able. I told him that I wasn't cancelling, not on such a perfect day – clear, calm and headed for the upper twenties. He tried to talk me out of soloing but I didn't listen, having referred to the mountain as only a large 'hill'. Compared to my other conquests, Lazy Mountain was a walk-up. I'd be careful and take it slowly, I said, attempting to convince Joe, but perhaps myself as well.

My large daypack was stretched tight with warm clothes, emergency supplies, two plastic water bottles and energy food. Near the top of the pack were my small Nikon camera, mini-field glasses, and a smart phone. I would clip my Garmin GPS to my belt and set it to 'auto record'. Later, I'd put my track down on Google Earth's depiction of Lazy Mountain.

At 10:20 I started up the dirt road from the Smith Road Trailhead, noting that there were no other vehicles in the parking lot. Surely on a relatively warm winter day the small lot would fill up. Within a hundred yards I stopped to slip on ice grips, which complemented my Black Diamond hiking poles. A half-mile later the road, glistening with ice formed by the warm spell in

the last several weeks, steepened. The grips held as well as studded tires, my weight concentrated mainly on the toes.

I left the road after three-quarters mile, ascending on a steep well-worn path that connects to the Matanuska Peak Trail, about two hundred yards above me, running parallel to the road. This was the place I had encountered a pair of stubborn moose on my last trip – moose that did not want to let me pass. No such problem today. Warmed by the climbing, and sunshine (the sun had just cleared the mountains to the south), I peeled down to a light-weight polypropylene undershirt.

The trail, void of deep snow, was often covered with an inch-thick icy crust. Without the grips and poles, I wouldn't have made it this far. Moose trails were plentiful but the big critters stayed out-of-sight. The only sounds were those of my poles and grips biting into the crusty surface, and my heavy breathing. Within twenty minutes, I came upon a sharply-cut gully, one where I had stopped for photography on my last climb. The particular attraction was an ice stalagmite formed by water dripping from a metal pipe, which apparently had been shoved under the trail for drainage. Rising about a foot, the ice cone, dazzling in the sunshine, looked somewhat like an ice-coated Parka squirrel, up straight on its hind legs. I came very close to pulling out the Nikon to get a close-up shot. My photograph in the late fall several years ago had been out-of-focus. However, I moved on, rationalizing that the sun angle would be even better on the return trip.

As I ascended on what would be the best trail surface of the day, open areas appeared and became more dominant, enabling my first look at the mountain tops that connect Lazy Mountain and Matanuska Peak. A half-mile from the gully, the route I would take to my destination departed from the Matanuska Peak Trail, branching hard left. But first, I stopped for a lunch

break, basking in the sunshine, enjoying the stunning mountain views surrounding the McRoberts Bowl. At this point, I was nearing the brush line and had a good view of the trail behind me. Surprisingly, no one was moving up the trail.

The major elevation gain lay just ahead, punctuated by short intervals of modest incline. The trail I now walked was much less trodden, with boot holes punched down through deeper snow. I found the smooth thick-crust open areas much easier. Soon the east side of Lazy's peak became visible over a high ridge, which led to the final ascent. My poles saved me from falling when a boot would break through the crust and lurch me sideways. An intermittent breeze, not present below, lent a chill which I answered with a windbreak. Still, I had no complaints for the conditions were unusually good for early February climbing.

About a third of the way to the peak, the trail bent southward, away from my destination. I left the marked trail and headed straight for the peak, walking over an expansive drift – for lack of a better term – that extended upward for perhaps a half mile. The smooth firm footing enabled me to gain elevation rapidly. Soon I could see footprints reaching up to intersect the original route (one that has been heavily used for decades) about five hundred feet below the peak. When I topped the final steep south-facing rise, with less than one hundred yards remaining, I was greeted by a brisk north wind. I sidestepped to the base of a small cliff and donned my insulated vest beneath my windbreak – now back to three layers.

To attain the top rock, a narrow crest of less than fifty feet must be traversed. Shear drops to both the east and west demand the climber's full attention with every step. The north wind, having increased, added to the challenge. Fortunately, the path had blown clear so the traction was good – all most like summer. At 1:10pm, two hours and fifty minutes after leaving the parking lot, I leaned into the wind on the highest outcropping. After several seconds of mentally

patting myself on the back, I continued north along the summit ridge until I found a three-foot south-facing wall where I'd be protected from the chilling wind.

I dug out my cell phone and called five people, two of whom were expecting a 'victory call'. Although I had many pictures from this perch, none had been taken in the winter, a lacking I quickly remedied. Satisfied that my friends would believe I had succeeded, I repacked the Nikon. At 1:40pm, I crossed the narrow crest again and started down, leaving the great vistas behind.

On the downward trek, I avoided the giant snow drift, instead stayed close to a route marked by cairns. A longer trek, this route eliminated the possibility of a snowy slide ending in the rocks – and perhaps an injury. The chances of encountering another climber were diminishing by the minute, a prime consideration for putting safety above speed.

There is a certain contentment knowing that only my eyes had witnessed this grandiose winter day on these mountains, back dropped against a deep blue sky. The flip side was that I would be truly on my own. Joe's warning against just that caused me to slow down and watch my footing more carefully. Several times I felt an ice grip slip but a quick pole plant kept me upright.

By the time I intersected the Matanuska Peak Trail – exactly where I had left it on the ascent – my knees were starting to complain, not a lot but just enough to get my attention. So it was a relief to spend the next half hour hiking on a more gradual trail.

The lure of photographing the ice cone, now bathed in low-angle light, brought me to a stop. The picture I wanted had to be taken slightly below the cone, and from the southwest. Spotting where I wanted to place my feet on the steep descent, I stepped off the trail – one step, two steps, and then the lower grip slipped! Before I could react, I had hit the hard surface, rolled

three times, and lost both poles. My daypack had come loose, but not off, and I believe that's what kept me from rolling further.

Eventually, my mind focuses on the pain in my left leg. In fact, what I feel is hard to describe – some kind of blending between a full leg cramp and numbness. For several minutes, I continue to lie there, assessing my predicament. Could I have broken a bone? Perhaps I should fish out my cell phone now and see if I can make a call. But I don't. I just lie there contemplating my past predicaments.

I'm not sure how much time passed, perhaps only minutes, before I sense a lessening of the pain. My spirit brightens as I gingerly move my left leg back and forth without causing additional discomfort. Before long, I decided it's time to try to get up. However, I'm lying in the bottom of the narrow gully, sided by forty-five degree slopes. Only way to move upward toward the trail is to crawl, pulling my body by grabbing onto the sweeping alder branches. Looking up toward the ice cone, I see my hiking poles, one now with a bend in the lower portion.

I suddenly realize what I should have known: the beautiful ice cone was formed on a sheet of ice, both created by the trickle from the pipe. Slowly, I approach the cone, at times my body stretched out between alders. Luckily, I locate a small place for a safe stance to take pictures. I stop, carefully pull out the Nikon, and snap two, one using the zoom control. Where a short time ago I couldn't safely step down, I now find just enough traction to make it back to the trail. My left leg was feeling almost normal – and I was feeling lucky.

I walk about 200 feet down the trail when I slip again, again arresting a fall with the poles. I find this odd because the condition of the trail is the same as the last 35 minutes before the spill. Glancing at my hiking boots, the problem becomes apparent – the left ice grip is gone!

Must have come off during my tumble, I reason. Looking back up the trail, I know I have to go back to get it. Without the grip for the steep lower trail, a fall, perhaps worse than the one at the gully, seems highly probable.

Several minutes later, carefully moving out on the narrow path where my trouble started, I spot the grip several yards beyond the last rollover. The only safe way down is to use the alders on the south slope of the gulley as hand holds and foot anchors, so I leave my poles on the trail. Favoring my left leg, I descend, bending the alders nearly to the ground. My fear that I had ripped out the heel strap proves unfounded. However, for the first time, I see the cause of my slips on downhill slopes – there are no pins for the heel – because there is *no heel!* After stretching the grip over my hiking boot, I ascend through the alders without slipping. From now on, I will concentrate on placing the toe of my boot down before the heel.

When I reach the place where I took the short connecting trail up from the old road, I stop to think about the icy surface I had encountered on the old road. To be safe, I'll have to walk *backwards* three-quarters mile. No way – I'll skip the road and trek the Matanuska Peak Trail which winds through the woods along the slopes to the north, down to join the Morgan Horse Trail.

With the exception of one foot placement mistake that lands me on my back, I have no other problems, arriving at the parking lot, which is still empty, at 4:30pm. Count me as lucky for the outcome could have been a whole lot different.

Lying in bed, I reflected back on the gully spill, wondering if I could put this in the category of 'cheating death', like those other improbable escapes. Perhaps I could have crawled out with a broken leg and eventually have dragged myself to the parking lot – you hear about

such amazing feats now and then. Or, maybe I could have crawled down the trail just far enough to be within cell phone range. No, the incident today didn't quite measure up.

Oh, the close-up picture I took of the ice cone was no better than the one I clicked before. I learned what more experienced photographers might have told me: trying to focus on ice, zoomed in, from close range doesn't work. If only I had known!