

# **Ptarmigan Ridge Avalanche Incident**

## **May 5, 2026**

Report by Dallas Glass

### **Incident Summary:**

On Sunday, May 3, 2026, a team of two climbers departed the West Side Road in Mount Rainier National Park, aiming to ascend the peak via Ptarmigan Ridge and descend the Ingraham Glacier. Due to road closures, this is a much longer approach than normal, covering more than 35 miles to reach the base of the climb. The pair slept at the route's lower bivy site on Monday night. They observed no avalanche or icefall activity in the terrain near the route. However, they did notice avalanche debris on the north side of the ridge but could not determine its origin.

The pair reported cold overnight temperatures and a solid freeze of the snow surface. They climbed the remainder of the lower Ptarmigan Ridge, arriving at the upper bivy site around 8- 8:30 am. From there, they put on glacier travel gear, including helmets. The team spaced out on their climbing rope approximately 40 ft apart, descended onto the North Mowich Glacier, and began the ¼ mile traverse towards the base of the upper Ptarmigan Ridge. This section of the route is exposed to overhead icefall, rockfall, and avalanches from a portion of the Liberty Cap Glacier.

Approximately halfway across the traverse, the pair heard an icefall release above them. They initially tried to move out of the way, but the debris quickly enveloped them. A barrage of snow and ice pelted the climbers for approximately 20 seconds, including blocks weighing more than 30 lbs. Climber 1 was struck multiple times in the head and one major blow to his side and upper thigh. Climber 2 was also hit multiple times in the head. Both helmets were significantly damaged in the slide.

When the avalanche ended, the two climbers retreated to the safety of the nearby ridge to discuss their options. Both had sustained only minor injuries. Given the team's limited supply of food and fuel and the multiday hike back to the West Side Road, they initially decided to attempt to complete the route. After climbing approximately 1000 vertical feet, the pair realized they could not continue. They initiated a 911 response and began descending to safer terrain. Mt Rainier officials were notified of the accident at 11:40 am and were able to establish SMS communications with the party around 12:30 pm.

Using a helicopter, rangers assessed the scene and made visual contact with the injured climbers. The pair continued descending while the rangers prepared a plan and equipment to evacuate the team. After returning to base, a second helicopter mission was launched at 4:20 pm. The climbers were safely airlifted from the site and taken to the Park Service helicopter landing pad around 5 pm. After being assessed by park staff, the pair proceeded on their own to the hospital for further evaluation.



Image 1: A view of the route and accident site from near the lower bivy site on Ptarmigan Ridge. Photo: NPS

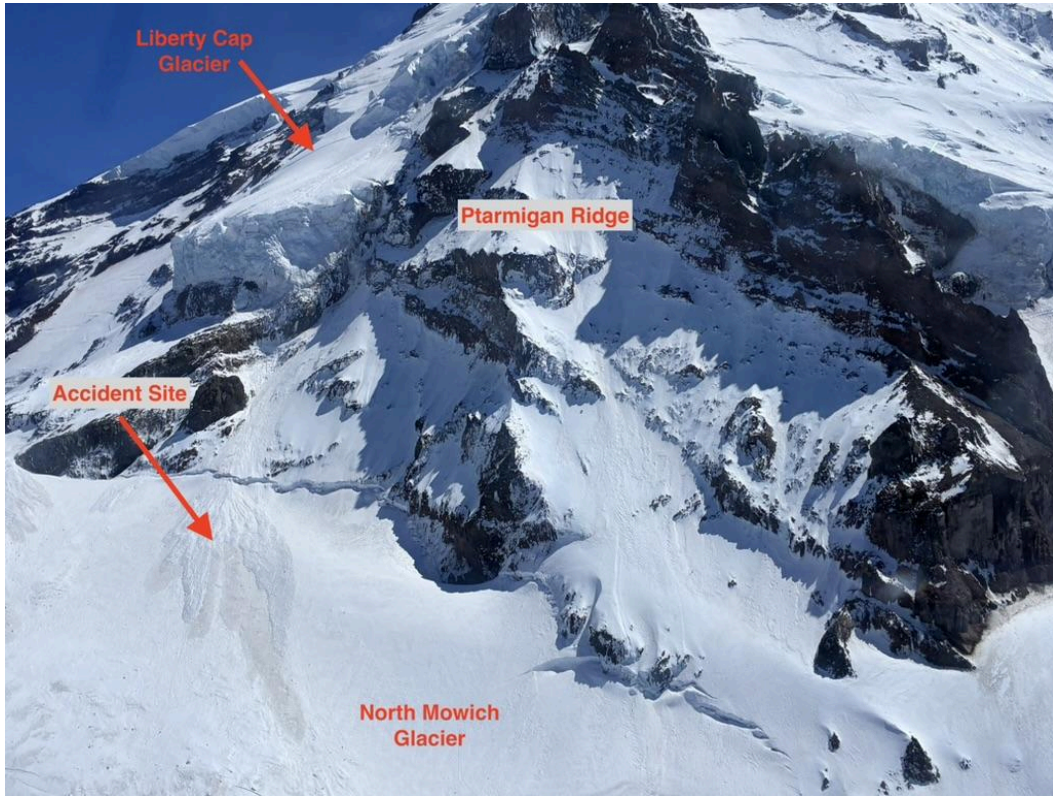


Image 2: A close-up of the accident site on the North Mowich Glacier. Photo: NPS

**Occurrence Time and Date:** Approx: 9:00 am, Tuesday, May 5, 2026

**Time First Reported to SAR:** 11:40 am

**Recovery/Rescue Time:** Approx: 4:45 pm

**Lat/Lon:** Approx: 46.87705, -121.78571

**Location:** North Mowich Glacier, Mount Rainier, Pierce Co., Mount Rainier National Park, WA

**Number in Party:** 2

**Number Caught:** 2

**Number Partially Buried, Critical or Non-critical:** 2 non-critical

**Number Completely Buried:** 0

**Duration of Burial:** N/A

**Number Injured:** 2

**Number Killed:** 0

**Avalanche Type:** Ice Fall (I)

**Trigger:** Natural (N)

**Size:** R1 /D1.5

**Bed Surface:** N/A

**Start Zone Aspect:** NW

**Start Zone Angle:** unknown

**Start Zone Elevation:** 11000 ft

**Height of Crown Face:** N/A

**Width of Fracture:** Unknown

**Vertical Fall:** Estimated 1200 ft

**Burial involved a terrain trap:** No

**Number of people that crossed start zone before avalanche:** None

**Avalanche occurred during:** Ascent

**Location of group in relation to start zone during avalanche:** Runout

**Avalanche Safety Gear Carried:** None

**Avalanche Training and Experience at Activity:** Advanced

**Signs of Instability Noted by Group:** The group noticed a similar avalanche on the north side of the ridge, but did not gain a clear view of the slide. They also noticed several older wet avalanches from the previous week.

**Extent of Injuries or Cause of Death:** Climber 1: leg contusion, Climber 2: concussion

**NWAC Forecast Zone:** West South

**Avalanche Danger Rating (Above, Near or Below Tree-line):** No avalanche forecast was issued the day of the accident.