

Saddle Peak Avalanche Accident

2 skiers caught, partially buried

Custer-Gallatin National Forest – 2 January 2018

Firsthand account from the two skiers caught:

Charlie and I left around 10:30 for a nice day of skiing at Bridger. Today had been our first day off from work at The Yellowstone Club in almost a month—we are both ski instructors. We lapped Slushmans 3 or 4 times (staying near the lift and feeling out the snow conditions) before deciding to leave the ski area boundary and observe conditions above and below the football field. We found some nice turns through the trees parallel to the football field and stopped to rest below the cliff faces near the cave. We rested for a moment and I asked Charlie what he thought of the snow conditions. “A little firm but seems stable to me” he said.

I started to stick my pole into the snow pointlessly and in that very moment heard the rumble. My heart sank and I knew that was not a sound I wanted to be hearing. I looked at Charlie and then up and saw a wall of snow shoot over the edge of the cliff. I barely had time to yell obscenities and attempt to ski away before my body was pounded with chunks of snow sending me into a tumble of grey and white. I felt as if I was in a washing machine. My mouth filled with snow making it difficult to breath and attempted to spit it out, I was still tumbling. It seemed like an eternity but must have only been 10 or 15 seconds. The snow began to clear around me and I was completely disoriented. My eyes met with a figure, it was Charlie. When I realized that we were both alright I felt a feeling of elation and confusion beyond compare. We had both been buried waist deep. I wiggled my way out and ran to him. I asked if he was alright and hugged him. Some others skiers saw us and the debris and came to assist us. Charlie lost a ski pole but we found both of our skis. We must have slid around 150 feet. After telling patrol we went home and Slushmans was closed off for the day. We really were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Ski patrol claimed it to be a natural slide. We are both extremely grateful to be alive.

Report from Bridger Bowl Ski Patrol:

At 12:48 two male skiers in their early 20's reported to the bottom lift operator of the Slushmans chairlift that they were both caught and partially buried in an avalanche south of the Bridger Bowl boundary underneath the cliffs of Saddle Peak, below the cave.

The two were traveling under the cliffs after leaving the south boundary and had stopped to look at the cave. They heard a rumble from above, saw snow coming over the cliffs, looked at one another and started skiing downhill as fast as they could. They were overtook by snow coming off the cliffs and one, possibly both were buried up to their or his waist. After self-extricating and retrieving gear that came off when they were hit, they were able to ski to the bottom of the Slushmans lift and report.

Two Bridger patrollers (A and B) interviewed the individuals involved at the bottom of the lift while another patroller (C) went to the boundary to visualize the scene. The access to terrain above the scene was closed and cleared and another patroller (D) went to the boundary to partner with (C).

Randy Elliott called the sheriff and was given the ok for (C) to proceed with a transceiver search of the debris with (D) watching the scene. A weak signal was first found then (C) turned off his cell phone and radio and the signal dissipated. No further signals were found and based on the statements made by the witnesses the scene was cleared at 1:05pm.

The slide was apparently triggered by a snowboarder above the cliffs cutting across a small wind loaded pocket. The fracture was at most 20" deep and 60' across. The snowboard track was the only track in the football field and obviously cut the starting zone.

Strong downslope and south winds transporting recent new snow was the predominant weather creating small to medium sized wind slabs mid slope across the greater Bridger Bowl region the previous night and morning.

The names and phone numbers of those involved are on file at Bridger Bowl.

Bridger Bowl Ski Patrol Obs from the resort:

Downhill winds started yesterday evening forming isolated wind slabs in usual locations. Mama and Papa Bear biggest results with up to 2' crowns running down to the upper flats. Low 3-4 touched the road, drifts and cones on S-2 provided some results and some not with rapid reloading on south side of upper ravine. Fingers buffed out and 4' deep downhill drift under Wildmans once again left a hole after the shot. Another incident south of the area today. Report in second e-mail.





Please contact Doug Chabot, Eric Knoff, or Alex Marienthal at the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center if you have questions: 406-587-6984

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