

MAYBIRD GULCH, SOUTHEAST OF SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH | 19960327

March 27, 1996

One backcountry skier caught and killed. A small wet-loose avalanche caught the skier in high-consequence terrain.

SITE

Maybird Gulch is three drainages east of Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort in Little Cottonwood Canyon, southeast of Salt Lake City, Utah. Maybird Gulch is a popular destination for backcountry tours.

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK SUMMARY

There was about six inches of consolidating snow sitting on a stout melt-freeze crust. The two days prior to the avalanche were clear and cool, with temperatures below freezing. On March 27, temperatures warmed to just above freezing and thin clouds moved in.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

Werner Rugner and two friends were finishing a backcountry ski tour with a descent down Maybird Gulch at 15:30. From about 8,000 feet in elevation, the creek in Maybird Gulch drops through a steep, narrow, V-shaped gully. Most tourers plan to stay to the west, or skier's left, of the gully on a small ridge. Rugner "bolted"⁷⁶ ahead of his two companions. He either chose to make a few more turns into the gully or did not know to stay to his left.

As Rugner's companions followed his tracks, they realized they were "getting sucked into the steep-sided gully and they began to trigger small"⁷⁷ wet-loose avalanches about six inches deep. They yelled to Rugner that it was unsafe and they needed to traverse back to the ridge. They received no response.

The pair debated what to do, and decided to continue following Rugner's tracks. They continued to trigger wet-loose avalanches. Both were briefly caught in the avalanches they triggered and "had to grab trees to keep from being taken down the steep slope."⁷⁸ Eventually Rugner's tracks led into but not out of a small wet-loose avalanche.

"Red flag"
indications
of danger

Terrain trap

RESCUE SUMMARY

Rugner had triggered a wet-loose avalanche. The avalanche either swept him down a 40- to 50-degree slope, or knocked him down and he slid along the slick bed surface. In any case, about 100 vertical feet below the crown, Rugner hit a small tree. His companions found him "wrapped around"⁷⁹ the tree. He had suffered massive trauma to his head, and did not respond to CPR.

His companions climbed up the avalanche track and traversed back to the typical exit route. They descended to the road and notified the authorities. Search-and-rescue teams recovered Rugner's body that evening.

AVALANCHE DATA

The wet-loose avalanche Rugner triggered was about six inches deep, and consisted of wet or moist snow sliding on a hard melt-freeze crust. The avalanche was about four feet

wide initially, and widened to about 15 feet. It started on a northeast aspect about 40 degrees in steepness, and the slope steepened to 48 degrees where Rugner hit the tree.

TYPE	TRIGGER	R SIZE	D SIZE	BED	ASPECT	CHARACTER
WL	ASu	1	1	O	NE	LW

COMMENTS

The weather conditions contributed to this accident. Thin clouds would have increased the melting in the surface snow—something often called greenhousing. Sitting above a slick crust, the shallow snow would have been easy to trigger in small loose wet avalanches. In lower-consequence terrain, these little avalanches would have little effect.

On the extremely steep slope of the gully, the small avalanche or a slide on the bed surface would have been very fast. The speed would have increased the impact forces and resulted in significant trauma when Runner hit the tree. This is an obvious case of small avalanches having large consequences.

19960331 PEARL LAKE, WEST OF MISSOULA, MONTANA | March 31, 1996

Three snowmobilers caught; one partially buried, one buried for 60 minutes.

SITE

Pearl Lake is in western Montana, just east of the Idaho border. It is one of the highest-elevation lakes in the Trout Creek drainage, and is nestled in a basin near treeline.

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK SUMMARY

“Red flag”
indications
of danger

About 12 to 14 inches of snow had fallen in the 18 hours prior to the avalanche. The new snow was sitting on top of an “ice crust”⁸⁰ that formed before the storm. The morning of March 31, it was cloudy, with poor visibility and occasional rain. When the clouds broke, riders could see “many small fresh avalanches.”⁸¹

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

Snowmobilers Bill Haflinger (34), Dan Hartung (31), and Todd Ludeman (29) were riding in the Pearl Lake area. Haflinger and Ludeman, in particular, were experienced mountain riders. They were high marking on a north aspect that was about 30 degrees in steepness.

More than
one person
on a slope

One of the riders got stuck a short distance above the lake around 12:30. The other two rode up to help. The avalanche broke about 75 feet uphill from the group, along a snowmobile track set earlier. Hartung’s snowmobile was still running, and he was able to gun his engine and ride off the avalanche. Haflinger and Ludeman were caught up in the avalanche.

RESCUE SUMMARY

The avalanche ran about 300 feet down the slope and stopped at Pearl Lake. Haflinger was partially buried in the debris. Hartung rode down and partially freed his companion.