Not carrying avalanche rescue gear meant the group could not perform a timely companion rescue and had to request outside help. In this case, although rescuers were close by—and far closer than they would be in most backcountry accidents—they were not able to find and excavate the victim for two hours. Companion rescue offers a buried victim the best chance for survival.

LIMA PEAKS, SOUTH OF LIMA, MONTANA | November 15, 1998 19981115

One hunter caught, buried, and killed

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

The Lima Peaks are a small cluster of peaks in the Beaverhead Mountains of western Montana, just north of the Continental Divide and south of the town of Lima. Scott Bettle (37) was elk hunting with two companions in the area. Early in the afternoon of Sunday, November 15, the hunters separated and planned to meet later in the day. When Bettle failed to make the meeting, one of his partners followed his tracks. Bettle's tracks crossed a saddle and dropped into upper reaches of Sawmill Creek. About 100 feet below the saddle, Bettle's tracks led into an avalanche and never came out. Bettle had entered the path about 50 feet below the crown.

Traveling alone

RESCUE SUMMARY

One partner went for help. Search and Rescue volunteers arrived at the avalanche site around 04:00. They "heard cracking sounds" and "got off to the side until daybreak." Searchers probed the debris on Monday.

Rescuers in a probe line found Bettle around 15:00 on Monday afternoon. His body was buried where the debris "entered trees," about 100 feet from the toe. He was buried under about five feet of debris.

Three avalanche dogs worked the site on Monday, but the area was contaminated by early rescue efforts and the dogs failed to alert.

AVALANCHE DATA

This was a hard slab avalanche, probably triggered by the hunter, and broke in old snow layers near the ground (HS-AFu-R2-O). On the slope, there was a three- to four-inch-thick crust over old snow with the texture of "granulated sand." Rescuers noted that the slope "was recently wind loaded."

Persistent Slab avalanche

The crown face was about 12 inches deep and about 30 feet wide. The slope angle near the starting zone was about 35 degrees. It started on a northeast-facing slope near tree line, at an elevation of about 9,600 feet. The avalanche ran about 500 vertical feet, but "didn't seem to damage even small six-inch diameter trees."

COMMENTS

It is easy to underestimate avalanche danger in early season, when snow barely covers the ground. Often, however, isolated slopes hold all the components needed for an avalanche. In this case, a slab of wind-drifted snow, a persistent weak layer, and a slope steep enough to slide. Not recognizing these islands of danger can have tragic consequences, as in this case. See 19961111 for a similar, early season accident with a less tragic outcome.