

Two backcountry tourers buried and killed

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS

There was a long period of dry and windy weather in November and December. The slope that avalanched was drifted heavily through this period, leaving dense layers of snow. During a very cold period in late December, surface hoar and faceted snow developed on the snowpack surface. More drifts buried the weak surface hoar and near-surface facets in the days prior to the accident.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

Fairview Canyon runs east from Fairview up towards Skyline Drive, on the crest of the Wasatch Plateau in central Utah. On January 2, two teenagers, Matthew Neilsen (16) and Jesse Krebs (17) left Mapleton, Utah to spend the day backcountry snowboarding. Neither teen carried avalanche safety equipment. When the two failed to return home that evening, the boys' families notified the Sanpete County Sheriff's office and then began looking for them. Family members located the teenagers' parked car near the top of the Fairview Canyon Road, on a ridge crest above Fairview Lakes. About 75 feet east of the road, they found two snowboards resting at the top of a broken cornice.

No rescue
equipment

RESCUE SUMMARY

The Sanpete County Sheriff Search and Rescue Team and Ambulance Service reported to the accident site with 27 searchers. Around 03:00 on January 3, rescuers located the teenagers while spot-probing around a large tree in the runout. Searchers found the teenagers right next to each other, buried under about four feet of debris.

Cornice fall

AVALANCHE DATA

The teens had walked onto the top of a cornice. The cornice broke under them, falling onto the slope below and entraining the pair in a slab avalanche. The slab broke up to five feet deep and 100 feet wide. The avalanche ran 150 vertical feet into scattered trees. The weak layer was buried surface hoar and faceted snow, sandwiched between densely drifted and very hard (pencil-to-knife hardness) layers of snow.

The slope was about 36 degrees in steepness at the top, and faced east-northeast. It makes an abrupt edge to the flat, meadowed plateau above. The slope was drifted heavily, with two to three times the amount of snow as in the surrounding areas.

COMMENTS

The roads across the Wasatch Plateau provides easy access to small, steep terrain features. These features do not appear to be avalanche terrain, in that there are few big slopes. The benign appearance of the terrain can lure recreationists onto cornices or avalanche-prone slopes.