

Snowshoer Dies in Draper Avalanche

Weary rescue crews battle snow, wind, cold, darkness to recover young victim

BY MICHAEL VIGH and CONNIE COYNE

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

DRAPER — Rescue crews felt their way along Little Willow Peak on Saturday night, carrying down the mountain the body of a young snowshoer who was buried in a 200-foot-long avalanche triggered by his hiking buddies.

It was rough going for the almost three dozen searchers, as a fast-moving storm slammed into the mountain during the afternoon, bringing winds gusting up to 70 mph, near whiteout conditions and wind chills plunging below minus-14 as the sun set.

About 7:30 p.m., the first group of rescuers, some on cross-country skis, made their way to a base camp set up by the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office near Wasatch Boulevard and 11800 South in the Draper area, about three miles below the search area. Hours in the cold and snow etched weariness and disappointment into their faces as they passed by the parents of Justin Heil, 22, of Salt Lake City, who waited for their son to be brought to them.

Heil set out at 6:30 a.m. to stomp out snowshoe tracks along back-country areas near Lone Peak with two friends, Aaron Bruderer, 24, and Steve Parkins, 24, both believed to be from Sandy, said Salt Lake County sheriff's Sgt. Lane Larkin.

It must have seemed like a spring morning to the trio as they made their way up the canyons, through virgin snow from Friday night's storm while the sun

warmed the temperatures into the 30s. But before noon, the victim told his friends he had a bad feeling about staying on the mountain and he started down, using Little Willow Canyon. It opens into the Salt Lake Valley at about 11000 South.

He was making his way back to Wasatch Boulevard when he was caught up in the avalanche — about 20 feet deep — triggered by his buddies about 1 p.m., Larkin said.

The two stayed on the side of the mountain for a short while and then made their way back to the road. When they did not find their friend, they called police from a nearby home at the base of the canyon.

A search and rescue team including people from the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office, Alta, Solitude and Snowbird ski resorts and trained dogs took about 90 minutes to make their way from the base camp to the site of the slide. A dog located Heil. Officials were unsure how deep the man had been buried.

None of the three snowshoers was carrying safety equipment or avalanche beacons.

Avalanche warnings of extreme danger were posted Saturday morning for the Wasatch mountains with slopes of 40 degrees and steeper. They probably will be continued through the weekend.

Heil was the sixth person to die in a Utah avalanche this year:

■ On Jan. 29, a snowmobiler died in an avalanche

on Mount Nebo.

■ On Jan. 20, two men reported missing on a snowmobile trip in Sanpete County were presumed dead, at least one of them in an avalanche.

■ On Jan. 3, two Utah teen-age boys died while snowboarding in Fairview Canyon, 100 miles south

of Salt Lake City.

Sheriff's Deputy Peggy Faulkner said Saturday's tragedy should serve as a reminder for would-be adventurers to check weather conditions before exploring the back country. People can call the Avalanche Forecast Center at 364-1581.



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Avalanche Deaths in Utah Hit Highest Mark in Five Years

BY RAY RIVERA

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Avalanche deaths in Utah this season are already double last year's fatalities and they have surpassed the totals for the past five years.

And we're just into the second week of February, the deadliest month for snow slides.

"It's a little more treacherous this year because we had that long dry spell," said Seth Shaw, a forecaster for the Utah **Avalanche** Forecast Center.

The dry spell served to create a sugary layer of snow that easily collapses under the weight of new snow, Shaw said.

"I was out skiing around today and it was pretty easy to kick off **avalanches**."

Justin Heil, 22, of Sandy, became Utah's seventh fatality when he was caught in a 200-foot-wide wave of powder while snowshoeing in a steep ravine just below Lone Peak in Little Willow Canyon on Saturday afternoon.

His two hiking companions, who inadvertently triggered the slide above him, were not injured.

On Jan. 29, a snowmobiler was buried near Mount Nebo in central Utah. Nine days earlier, two men were reported missing on a snowmobile trip in Sanpete County.

The search was eventually called off and the men are believed dead, at least one in an avalanche.

And on Jan. 3, two Utah County teen-agers died while snowboarding in Fairview Canyon, about 100 miles south of Salt Lake City.

The season's first fatality came on Nov. 7 when a New Hampshire snowboarder was overtaken by a 20-foot-wide slide under Mount Baldy near Snowbird.

Heil's death came on a day when **avalanche** danger was low except on steep slopes of 40 degrees or more. Gusting winds may have contributed to the slide, said Carol Ciliberti of the Utah **Avalanche** Forecast Center in Sunday's back country **avalanche** and mountain weath-

er advisory.

Avalanche danger is expected to increase over the next several days as winds blow hard from the west and northwest and a new front moves in that could drop heavy snow Tuesday morning.

"The lower elevations where the snowpack is damp and relatively shallow could be particularly dangerous as the snow probably won't support a lot of added weight," Ciliberti said in her report.

Three people fell victim to **avalanches** in the 1997-98 season; four died in each of the seasons between 1994 and 1997; and five died in the 1993-94 season.

State parks safety experts say the best way to avoid an **avalanche** is to stay out of areas where the danger is high. The first step is to call the Utah **Avalanche** Forecast Center at 364-1582 in Salt Lake City before heading to the hills, or check the center's web site at www.noaa.gov/Saltlake. **Avalanche** information is updated every morning by 7:30.