

Avalanche claims couple's lives

By **PAT CHRISTIAN**

The Daily Herald

PARK CITY — The bodies of a couple killed by a massive avalanche Tuesday were recovered Wednesday afternoon in the Red Pine Lake area near The Canyons ski resort.

Searchers hunted through the night after the couple failed to pick up their 4-year-old son, who was left at a resort day-care center.

Names of the 47-year-old man and 41-year-old woman are being withheld by Summit County Sheriff's officials.

Authorities said it appears they had been skiing near the eastern face of 9,700-foot Square Top Mountain above frozen Red Pine Lake.

The pair were described by Summit County Sheriff's authorities as well-conditioned and experienced skiers.

For slopes as steep as Square Top, Utah's Avalanche Forecast Center had announced an extreme avalanche warning.

Warnings followed many higher elevations receiving more than six inches

See **AVALANCHE**, A2

AVALANCHE

Continued from A1

of snow over unstable layers that threatened to break loose on their own or after being triggered by skiers.

Ethan Green, with the avalanche center, said the avalanche that killed the couple broke loose in hard slabs that often cause fatal physical trauma to victims.

He said the avalanche cascaded down the slope nearly 900 feet in a swath reaching 300 feet wide, stopping near the lake.

Green said similar conditions exist in steep eastern faces in mountains from Provo to Ogden and danger is expected to remain high through the weekend.

Avalanche forecasts for the Provo area backcountry can be heard at 378-4333.

"Searchers found two different bodies," Blaise Carrig, a Canyons representative said Wednesday.

The bodies were taken to the state medical examiner's office.

Skis were located first, Carrig said. About five to 10

minutes later, the first body was discovered at 1:27 p.m. The second body was recovered at 1:50 p.m.

"We started searching after the 4-year-old boy was not picked up at day-care," Summit County Sheriff's Lt. Joe Offret said.

The county's search and rescue team was assisted by ski patrol members from all Park City resorts and special avalanche dogs, he said.

Chip Kingfield, a resort spokesman, said, "We launched a search of the resort through the night, and early today the focus moved outside our boundaries."

Offret said someone in a search helicopter Wednesday spotted ski tracks suggesting skiers had ventured out onto Square Top's face.

Carrig said rescuers were unable to venture onto the long and wide avalanche zone until the threat of secondary avalanches from above were reduced for rescuers.

Threatening snow slabs that remained high on the slopes were triggered with explosives and brought down so a direct body search and recovery could begin in earnest after noon.

Area avalanche danger remains high

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The couple killed Tuesday in a Park City avalanche has been identified by Summit County Sheriff officials as Gregory Ross McKay, 47, and his wife, Loren Olsen McKay, 41, of Park City.

In the wake of the tragedy, forecaster Tom Kimbrough warned that avalanche danger is high, especially in the Park City, Provo and Ogden mountains where many large slides have occurred in the past few days.

One snowmobiler was totally buried Wednesday in White Pine Canyon near Park City, Kimbrough said. The man was rescued by friends and was not injured.

Kimbrough, whose job is to ski Utah's backcountry as he assesses avalanche threats, said conditions are so dangerous he's not even going out into steep areas until the situation stabilizes.

"I'm going to stay under my bed...I'm not going to be sticking my neck on steep slopes for a while," he said, adding he expects instability to last through this weekend.

The McKays' deaths have left their 4-year-old son, who had been dropped off at The Canyons ski resort day-care center, an orphan. The boy is being cared for by family members, officials said.

Dogs and rescuers Wednesday had probed the avalanche debris field until they

recovered the pair.

Initially skiing The Canyons, the pair ventured off the resort into backcountry areas where they skied onto the extreme face of 9,700-foot-high Square Top Mountain. They were buried by a 300-foot-wide snow slab avalanche that traveled nearly 1,000 feet down the slope angled steeper than 30 degrees.

Kimbrough said in the past couple of days there have been multiple major avalanches reported in the Spanish Fork Peak area and Provo Canyon's North Fork, all naturally triggered.

For a recorded avalanche forecast for the Provo area phone 378-4333.

"The one near Spanish Fork

was pretty large, up to 400 feet wide and running halfway down the slope," he said.

The forecaster said another big one was reported on Elk Point near Aspen Grove.

And in the Salt Lake area, mountain avalanches were triggered by people, but no injuries were reported.

"On Wednesday, two snowshoers were caught in Little Cottonwood Canyon near Alta on a south-facing slope," Kimbrough said. "Another person triggered a slide in the backcountry near Brighton, and two avalanche workers went for a ride in Big Cottonwood."

Speaking of the snowshoers, Kimbrough said they were trekking on a convex slope, and when they triggered the slide,

one was able to stop himself from being carried down with the avalanche debris.

Kimbrough said most debris went down one side of the slope, with the second victim going down the side with less debris.

"He only ended up being buried to his waist," Kimbrough said.

He said the snowmobiler in White Pine Canyon was lucky to escape with his life.

"It was a big slide, a thousand feet wide and a thousand vertical feet triggered by a snowmobiler who actually was caught in it and totally buried.

"But his partners were on the ball. He had a beacon on, and they had him out in less than 10 minutes."



BRIAN RITZBERG/The Associated Press

SEARCHING: An employee of The **Canyons** ski resort in Park City Wednesday photographs the east face of Square Top, a mountain outside the resort's property where an **avalanche** killed two skiers Tuesday.





BRIAN FITZGERALD/The Daily Herald

Searching for a sign: Kip Christie, above, assistant patrol director for The Canyons ski resort in Park City, surveys the mountainside where a couple was later found dead Wednesday. Below, a ski patrol member from Deer Valley waits to assist in the search.