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**WINDY RIDGE, NORTHEAST OF KAMAS, UTAH**

20020131a

January 31, 2002

One backcountry skier caught, buried, and killed; one dog killed

**WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS**

The Uintas are a west-to-east-oriented mountain range in northeast Utah. Windy Ridge is a small sub-range in the northwest portion of the Uintas, and this area lies about 18 miles northeast of the small town of Kamas. Weather data taken from the Smith & Morehouse SNOTEL site—at an elevation of 7,600 feet and within a few miles of the accident site—showed the following:

There was no snow before November 20, but then two inches of snow-water equivalent fell through December 1. This may have totaled two feet of snow. December brought a series of small storms, followed by a fairly dry January. A major storm hit late on January 26, and by the 28th, three inches of snow-water equivalent had fallen, which could have been three feet of snowfall. The Utah Avalanche Center rated the avalanche danger in the nearby Wasatch Range as Considerable.

**ACCIDENT SUMMARY**

On Thursday morning, January 31, Brian Roust (29) and a friend began skinning from the intersection of the Weber Canyon and Smith & Morehouse Roads. They were accompanied by their two dogs. They carried full avalanche rescue gear, plus their dogs were wearing beacons. Roust was a very experienced backcountry skier and had been a ski patroller at Park City. At the time, he worked in the snow safety department at the Canyons Resort.

Their plan this day was to ski on the Thousand Peaks Ranch, which is private land but is open to public use. They crossed the Weber River and headed east for about a quarter-mile, then they turned north, heading up a ridge that leads to the Windy Ridge area. They ascended the ridge to an area locally called Nor'easter Bowl at about 9,400 feet elevation. This bowl basically faces northeast (thus its name), with skier's right being more north-facing, and skier's left more east-facing.

Ahead of them, another group of four skiers had already made one run in the bowl and was climbing up. Their skin track made switchbacks up a treed ridge to the south of the bowl and then traversed across the starting zone of a small slide path before gaining the main ridgeline. On the previous day, some members of this party of four had skied the northern portion of the bowl, and that day, they had used a skin track to the north of the bowl to ascend. All members of this group were equipped with avalanche rescue gear.

Brian Roust, his companion, and the two dogs reached the top of Nor'easter Bowl. Then the men skied and the dogs ran down the south side of the bowl (skier's right) next to the trees. At the bottom they began skinning up the track set by the party of four. The skiers and the dogs traveled up the track at different speeds and quickly became spread out over the track.

The group of four reached the top and began their second run on the skier's left side of the bowl. The second skier in the group triggered an avalanche; one of his friends yelled "Go left!" and the skier made it out of the slide. It was a sizeable slide; the crown was two to four feet deep and 300 feet wide.

At this point, members of both groups made voice contact with each other and quickly determined that no one was caught in the avalanche. The group of four had two on the ridge and two at the bottom of the bowl. Roust's group of two was spread out along the skin track; Roust and his dog Ginger had climbed faster and were well up the track, while his companion and dog were near the bottom.

Traveling alone

Roust was out of sight from all the other skiers when he triggered an avalanche at about 13:00. The avalanche released when he was climbing near a stand of trees in the starting zone, and it carried Roust and Ginger down through several stands of trees before burying them both. None of the other skiers in the two groups saw the avalanche. The only witness was a skier in a third group, about a quarter mile away.

### RESCUE SUMMARY

When Roust's companion neared the top of the skin track, he saw that the last switchback had been washed out by an avalanche. There were no ski tracks on the bed surface, and upon reaching the top of the ridge he realized that Brian had been caught in the slide. He called out to the other skiers in the area, and they all went into rescue mode.

Roust's partner turned his rescue beacon to receive and began searching from the top of the slide, while the two skiers below began searching lower portions of the debris. The rescuers lower in the slide path quickly picked up the signal from a transmitting rescue beacon and dug up a loose beacon about two feet below the snow surface. They turned the beacon off and continue searching. They picked up a second signal and began probing and digging. This was Roust's beacon, and they found him buried under four feet of snow, 400 vertical feet below the crown line. His skis and poles were not found. He had been buried 20 minutes, had suffered head and neck trauma, and did not respond to resuscitation. It was later affirmed that Roust had died from head and neck trauma, not suffocation.

The rescuers determined that the first beacon they found had been on Ginger, Roust's dog. They didn't find Ginger.

### AVALANCHE DATA

Persistent Slab  
avalanche

The avalanche occurred on a northeast-facing slope, releasing at an elevation of 9,365 feet and falling about 665 feet vertical. Slope angle at the starting zone was 34 degrees. The alpha angle from toe to starting zone was 26 degrees. Vegetation on the slope was stands of mixed aspen and fir trees with openings running both vertically and horizontally through the path.

Investigators classified the fatal avalanche as HS-ASu-R3-O. The fracture line varied from two to four feet deep and was 150 feet wide. There were deep piles of debris on the uphill sides of the trees in the path. The debris near the toe had flowed into a gully about 75 feet wide. The first slide was similarly classified as HS-ASu-R3-O.

### COMMENTS

Two avalanches were triggered by two groups in the same bowl a few minutes apart. The Utah Avalanche Center rated the danger as Considerable that day, meaning human-triggered avalanches were likely. It was every bit of that. The members of these two groups were experienced backcountry skiers, and they most likely knew the avalanche danger rating. And they knew they were exposed to avalanches not only on their descents but also near the top of their skin track. It was a risk that they apparently accepted.

Putting beacons on dogs has spurred a bit of debate. It's understandable that dog owners would like their dog to be found quickly if buried in an avalanche. But if a dog

and person are both buried in an avalanche, the rescuers cannot distinguish between signals. If the dog is located and dug out first, the buried person has a lower chance of survival. This has raised a moral dilemma: should dogs be on an equal-rescue footing as humans? We'll let you, the reader, decide.

## LIONHEAD, NORTHWEST OF WEST YELLOWSTONE, MONTANA | January 31, 2002

20020131b

One snowmobiler caught and buried

### ACCIDENT SUMMARY

The southern end of the Madison Range is a popular destination for snowmobiling. It is about 17 miles northwest of West Yellowstone, Montana, and offers a variety of terrain, including avalanche terrain. The area is referred to as Lionhead, the Lionhead Mountains, and the Henrys Lake Mountains.

On the afternoon of Thursday, January 31, two snowmobilers were riding—and highmarking—on a slope of Lionhead. Both were experienced riders, knew the risks in highmarking, and carried beacons and shovels.

Inadequate  
rescue  
equipment

One rider got stuck trying to climb a steep, 600-foot hill. He got off his sled and while he was trying to free it, the slope fractured about 400 feet above him. His partner witnessed the avalanche from a safe spot—a small ridge—near the bottom of the avalanche path.

When the avalanche stopped, the rider who witnessed the avalanche rode onto the debris. He did not see any surface clues, so he began a beacon search. He acquired a signal almost right away. Within a few minutes, he decided he was close enough to start digging. About 10 minutes after the avalanche, he had dug through about five feet of debris and struck his partner's helmet. The buried man, though unconscious, was breathing.

The rescuer took several minutes to make a cell phone call to notify the authorities in West Yellowstone. He then spent another 10 to 15 minutes removing the remainder of the snow that covered his partner. The buried man regained consciousness after being buried for a total of about 20 minutes. He remembered being caught in the avalanche and heard his partner searching for him before he blacked out. He was buried lying on his side, perpendicular to the slope, and wasn't injured.

The next day, the men retrieved the snowmobile, which was buried under five feet of debris, at the same elevation and 20 feet from where the victim had been buried.

### AVALANCHE DATA

The avalanche was about 500 feet across and ran about 600 feet vertical. The crown was at 8,400 feet in elevation and was two to four feet deep. The avalanche fractured on a buried weak layer of near-surface facets that had formed near the snow surface during a cold, dry spell around Christmas. The average slope angle of the bed surface was 37 degrees. The avalanche was classified as HS-AMu-R3-O.

Persistent Slab  
avalanche

### COMMENTS

This was an avalanche incident with a feel-good outcome, and, quite frankly, we wish we could write up more events that focus on the positive. This pair took