

Three presumed dead
after canyon avalanche

Three men were presumed dead after being trapped in an **avalanche** Friday afternoon while snowboarding in an area of Provo Canyon above Sundance called Roberts Horn Chute.

Utah County Sheriff Jim Tracy said a total of 14 people in three different parties were in the area around 4:30 p.m. Friday when three **avalanches** occurred in succession, measuring a half-mile long and three city blocks wide at the base, according to Tracy. The snow was 4-14 feet deep.

Avalanche danger had been rated as high Friday in the area by the Utah **Avalanche** Center because of the recent storm activity.

Many of the 11 who made it out of the canyon were partially buried and at least two were completely buried alive and had to be dug out by others.

Three men, all Utah County residents between the ages of 18 and 20, are unaccounted for as of Friday night, Tracy said.

When asked if the three could still be found alive, Tracy said nothing is impossible "but it is not probable at this point." The names of the victims were not released because the families had not been notified, he said. Fearing another **avalanche** was imminent, Utah County Search and Rescue team members were called off the mountain at 7:30 p.m.

Tracy said helicopters would set off explosives in the mountains above the area this morning to trigger an **avalanche**, after which crews were expected to resume searching.

The three had been on the mountain with two other roommates, all of whom live together in Utah County, Tracy said. The two

"We saw this enormous wall of snow coming toward us. Our first thought was to get out of the chute and we made three or four steps and then it was on us. It was just white and shooting past us."

Hyrum Durtschi
avalanche survivor

Safe: Jason Durtschi, 26, makes a phone call while his brother Hyrum Durtschi, 28, (both of Pleasant Grove) drives their car down Provo Canyon after they survived an avalanche.



Avalanche

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roommates, whose names were also not released, were rescued by others in the area after being buried by the avalanche.

Hyrum Durtschi, 28, and his brother, Jason, 26, both of Pleasant Grove, were snowshoeing in the area, which is popular for snow recreation, when the avalanches occurred.

"We left the car about 3 o'clock," said Hyrum Durtschi. "We were up at the chute about 4 o'clock and we looked up and we saw this enormous wall of snow coming toward us. Our first thought was to get out of the chute and we made three or four steps and then it was on us. It was just white and shooting past us."

Durtschi said he managed to face downward and slide on his bottom as he was pushed by the snow. His brother tumbled and became buried up to his chest. The snow avalanche lasted approximately 30 seconds.

"My first thought as snow was hitting was to pray and think about how much I wanted to be at home," he said. "We started calling for each other, and then the snow settled and I think there must have been a two-minute break and we looked up and there was another avalanche shooting down at

us. Before we had time to do anything it was upon us."

When the second slide stopped, Durtschi said he again called out to his brother, and heard him respond. Durtschi headed toward the forest at the edge of the chute, about 100 feet away, and called for his brother to follow him.

"I was buried about up to my knees and my snowshoes had stayed on by some miracle," he said. "I managed to make it to the forest and Jason was still out on the chute. I asked him to follow me and it turns out he was buried up to his shoulders in snow, which I didn't know at the time."

By the time Durtschi had reached the forest, he realized four other people who had been in the area were digging his brother out of the snow. After Jason made it to the forest, the two made their way to the Aspen Grove trailhead parking lot. Jason had lost his snowshoes and his backpack but was otherwise OK.

Durtschi said both he and his brother were experienced snowshoers and were familiar with the area.

"I think it was just essentially terrible conditions," he said. "None of us should have been up there. There were probably two-and-a-half feet of fresh snow, so it was perfect avalanche conditions."

Minutes before the first slide, the two had even joked about being featured on the news as two lost snowshoers, he said.

"It does not occur to you that it could happen to you," he said. "You just don't realize how large an event it is. You think it will be a small wall of snow or you think 'I can run out of it' and none of that was true."

The Aspen Grove area had 52 inches of snow as of Friday night, 29 inches of which had fallen starting on Christmas Day, said Dennis Harris, spokesman for the Utah County Sheriff's Office.

David James, overseer of the BYU weather station, said recent snow storms had dropped wet, dense snow on top of older snow, creating unstable conditions.

The Utah Department of Transportation closed State Road 92 leading into American Fork Canyon Friday morning because of fears that unstable snow could lead to an avalanche, said Geoff Dupaix, a UDOT spokesman. Tracy also closed a portion of State Road 92 on the Provo Canyon side in order to facilitate access for rescue crews.

► **Amie Rose** contributed to this report.

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Photos by IAN WINGFIELD/Daily Herald

Utah County Sheriff's Department Sgt. Spencer Cannon, directs a Provo police unit up the Aspen Grove road closer to an area of Provo Canyon called Roberts Horn Chute in Sundance where an avalanche occurred, presumably killing three men.

Weather forces rescue crews to call off search for snowboarders

By MARK EDDINGTON
AND MICHAEL N. WESTLEY
The Salt Lake Tribune

PROVO CANYON — Three young Utah County men were missing Friday night after heavy snowfall triggered a series of **avalanches** in the back country above the Sundance Resort, officials said. Officials believe that as many as 14 people were caught in the moving snow.

A man snowshoeing with his family nearby saw the first **avalanche** and called Utah County Sheriff's dispatch on his cell phone at 4:27 p.m., police said. He said he could see as many as seven people in the Robert's Horn Chute of the **Aspen Grove** recreation area, about a 2½ miles north of the Sundance Ski Resort.

Two smaller slides hit the area before search and rescue teams made it on the mountain around 5 p.m.

A group of five Utah County men who were snowboarding were carried by the slide into the lower portion of the basin. An 18-year-old and a 20-year-old dug themselves out with only minor injuries, police said. High winds and drifting snow forced search and rescue teams off the mountain around 8 p.m. before a 20-year-old from Pleasant **Grove**, a 19-year-old from Orem and an 18-year-old whose address was not given could be accounted for.

None of the snowboarders was outfitted with **avalanche** equipment and their skill level varied from a few weeks of experience up to as many as five years, police said. Poor weather



DANNY CHAN LA/The Salt Lake Tribune

Search and rescue personnel come off the mountain after searching for **avalanche** victims. Three Utah County men were missing Friday, after a series of **avalanches** near the **Aspen Grove** recreation area north of the Sundance Ski Resort.

conditions and an unstable snow base frustrated the rescue effort. Crews are faced with searching a snow field estimated to be more than 800 feet wide, ¼-mile long and between 4 and 14 feet deep, according to Lt. Dave Bennet of Utah County Sheriff's Office.

"When the snow stops, it sets up like concrete and it's very unlikely that anyone could survive those conditions," Bennet said.

Utah County Sheriff Jim Tracy said the slide was not triggered by people in the chute, but rather from

heavy snow near the peak of the mountain, which reaches more than 11,000 feet. Friends and family members of the five snowboarders gathered at a command post set up at the nearby **Aspen Grove** family camp and
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AL HARTMANN/*The Salt Lake Tribune*

Salt Lake County sheriff's Deputy Mark Olsen stands outside his truck blocking the entrance to Big Cottonwood Canyon on Friday afternoon. Big Cottonwood was open for part of Friday's storm but Little Cottonwood Canyon Road stayed closed the entire day because of avalanche danger.

Avalanche leaves three missing

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conference center. As of 1 a.m. Friday, 29 inches of new snow fell at the camp, according to officials.

Search and rescue crews from Utah and Wasatch counties, joined by employees from Sundance Resort and other agencies, scoured the slide area with the help of rescue dogs, Bennett said.

Rescue crews hope to continue searching today after a helicopter drops explosives in the upper portion of the bowl triggering any additional slides, Tracy said.

The high snow totals forced Utah avalanche forecasters to issue a rare "extreme danger" rating Friday afternoon.

"We had relatively stable snow before this storm... but we have now put a lot of weight on top of it," said Bruce Tremper, director of the Forest Service Utah Avalanche Center (UAC). "There is the potential for some

pretty big, long-running avalanches."

Friday began with a high avalanche danger warning, but Tremper bumped it up to extreme in the afternoon.

"The difference between high and extreme is the possibility of long-running natural avalanches going past historic boundaries. Someone walking in an otherwise safe place could get hit," Tremper said. "We only use the extreme level maybe one day a year and I don't think we did at all last year."

Tremper said the avalanche warning would probably return to high by this morning, but that Utah may see the extreme warning again as soon as Monday or Tuesday when another storm is expected.

"People will have a really hard time getting into the backcountry and I would encourage them to avoid going there right now," he said. "Stick to the resorts, which practice avalanche control, or stay home and shovel the walks."

For more information on backcountry avalanche danger, call the UAC at 801-364-1581.

Tribune reporter Brett Prettyman contributed to this story.