

Rescuers rush against time



GRAYSON WEST/PARK RECORD

Friday's massive avalanche in Dutch's Draw canyon may be one of the largest in recent history. Searchers were still on scene looking for victims as the sun went down.

Massive avalanche claims an unknown number of victims

By PATRICK PARKINSON

Of the Record staff

The person's tracks were still visible near where the snow broke loose from the rest of the mountain. But that was the only human sign rescuers had to go on.

At 6 p.m. Friday, "multiple" victims were feared dead after an avalanche above The Canyons ski resort boundary. Rescuers from law enforcement agencies throughout northern Utah were searching at dusk for people who witnesses say were buried by the massive slide near an area known as Dutch's Draw.

The avalanche, which was roughly 500 yards long and 30 feet deep, occurred on U.S. Forest Service property adjacent to the ski resort, Summit County Sheriff Dave Edmunds said.

"These individuals passed by a gate with some skulls and crossbones on it," he said, about a barrier that separates the resort from the backcountry. "Because of the depth of the snow, it's making the search effort very difficult."

The snow near the top of the slide was nearly 16 feet deep, however, depths increased as the snow slid, Edmunds said.

Ski patrollers from The Canyons were first on the

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'Multiple' victims feared dead

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scene when the avalanche was reported to the Summit County Sheriff's Office around 1 p.m. More than 80 searchers soon began scouring the area with dogs and in helicopters.

"There's a high possibility of a second slide ... this is an area where we're not supposed to have skiers and snowboarders," Edmunds said, adding that search efforts would continue as long as rescuers could stay safe. "It's getting very close to a recovery operation."

With no bodies recovered Friday evening, Edmunds said searchers were speaking with roughly 10 witnesses to determine the number of people who may be buried.

"It's very dangerous up there," he said.

As word of the avalanche spread around the country, Edmunds fielded calls Friday afternoon from family members of people who had skied that day at The Canyons and hadn't checked in.

Those with information about possible victims are encouraged to call (800) 828-8477.

"If you go outside the boundaries of any ski resort you are on your own," Edmunds said, adding that The Canyons is not legally responsible for the area where the slide occurred.

The victims, believed to be male, likely accessed that area of the Wasatch-Cache National Forest via the Ninety-nine 90 lift at The Canyons, he said.

"These are people who were reckless and they may have paid with their own life ... we haven't talked to anybody that was in the slide that survived," Edmunds said around 5 p.m. "The likelihood of survival at this point is very low."

He still had no information



SCOTT SINE/PARK RECORD

Summit County Sheriff Dave Edmunds fields questions from reporters Friday afternoon in Sun Peak after a "massive" avalanche near The Canyons ski resort boundary.

about where the victims are from, their ages or whether they were equipped with avalanche beacons.

"I'm willing to say more than two," he added, when pressed about the number of people possibly buried in the slide. "The witnesses were in the vicinity ... 'scary, huge, a lot of snow coming down,' that's how they described it."

Five lifts were closed at The Canyons Friday afternoon as resort staff assisted searchers, said Katie Eldridge, a spokeswoman for the resort, strongly discouraging patrons at The Canyons from ever leaving the resort boundaries.

"There's no avalanche control that goes on in this area,"

Edmunds said. "You're putting your lives at risk and you're putting the lives of my searchers at risk."

The Canyons will resume normal operations Saturday but avalanche danger remains extremely high in the backcountry.

"This is somewhere where they just shouldn't have been," Edmunds said. "We've had numerous avalanches over the last few days ... do not venture into the backcountry, it's far too perilous right now."

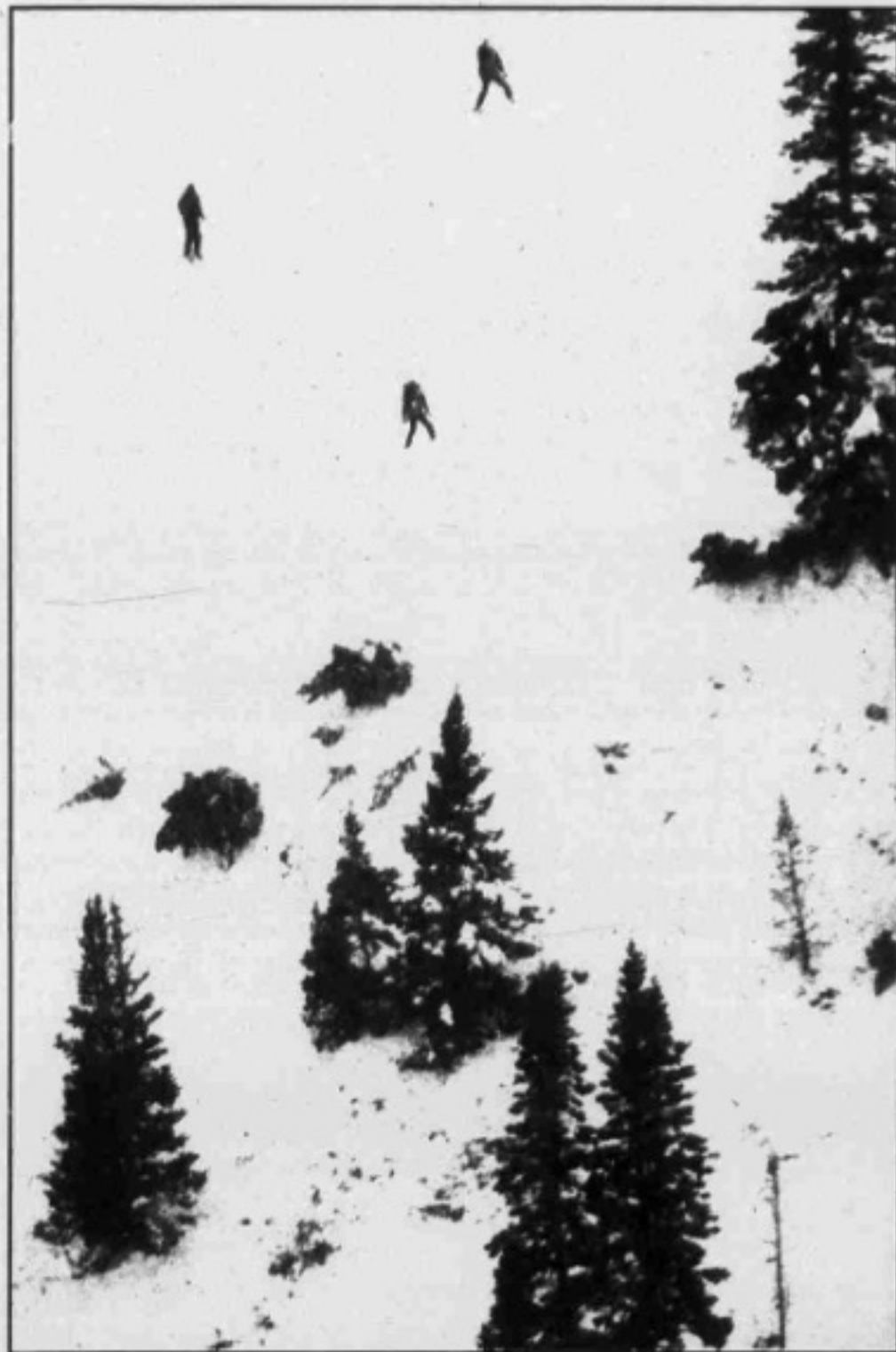
According to the avalanche advisory, posted Friday morning on www.avalanche.org, "The avalanche activity is widespread enough to make most avalanche professionals nervous."



DOUGLAS C. PIZAC/Associated Press

The fracture line of an avalanche lies across a mountainside, where at least one skier, according to officials, is believed trapped Friday outside Park City.

Avalanche hits near Park City



ROBERT JOHNSON/The Standard Examiner

Three search-and-rescue patrol members ski through debris at the scene of an avalanche in the backcountry adjacent to The Canyons ski resorts in Park City on Friday.

Slide outside
The Canyons
traps skiers in
the backcountry

Doug Alden

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PARK CITY — A quarter-mile-wide avalanche outside The Canyons ski resort Friday buried at least two victims in a backcountry area marked with a "skull and crossbones" warning to thrill-seekers.

No bodies have been recovered, and victims were believed to be buried in snow up to 30 feet deep.

Based on eyewitness accounts of the slide, Summit County Sheriff Dave Edmunds estimated late Friday between two and five people were trapped.

He discounted earlier reports that as many as 15 people were buried.

"We don't believe it's a staggering number," Edmunds said, adding that authorities had not yet received specific reports of missing persons.

The rescue effort was called off at about 5 p.m. because of concerns over secondary slides, Edmunds said. The "slow and meticulous" search will resume at 7 a.m. today, he said.

Before stopping for the day, rescue crews had shifted to recovery mode, a sign that crews were not expecting to find survivors.

"I think it's safe to say the odds of surviving are very, very low," he said.

Nearly 100 search and rescue workers, rescue dog crews and members of ski patrols from Summit County resorts had searched the area of Dutch Draw for victims, Edmunds said.

The enormity of the slide was underscored when rescuers, working on 30-degree slopes, found that their 20-foot probes weren't going deep enough into the snow.

The avalanche happened

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■ Closed again: American Fork Canyon reclosed, A3

Avalanche

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outside the boundary of The Canyons resort on federal land in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest.

Skier Jess Fleig, speaking to The Associated Press on a cell phone from a mountaintop while skiing at The Canyons, said he frequents the backcountry, but he said he stayed away from the popular Dutch Draw area Friday.

"I looked at that ride probably 20 or 30 minutes before it went and what immediately came to mind is that's trouble waiting to happen," the 35-year-old disc jockey said.

From the access point to the draw, just south of The Canyons resort's Ninety-Nine 90 chair lift, numerous ski tracks were visible, Fleig said.

"It's a very popular area. You have to hike 10 or 15 minutes to get there, but it's marked with skull and crossbones and a warning that you could die," he said. "(The slide) is huge. It ripped from the very top, from side to side and the debris goes all the way down through the valley below and through the trees."

Fleig was riding up a resort chair lift with two resort employees and heard the initial radio communication in the moments after the slide.

At that time resort crews weren't sure how many people might be in the slide, but said that through binoculars six or seven people could be seen scurrying about the rubble, Fleig said.

"It was crazy, chaos," he said.

Dutch Draw is an out-of-bounds area just south of The Canyons resort, but the resort "can't close it off. It would be like trying to close a city park," said Bruce Tremper, director of the Utah Avalanche Center.

The center warned of considerable avalanche danger Friday, which means human-triggered avalanches were probable.

"We're recommending people avoid being on or underneath any steep slopes," Tremper said.

Edmunds said he was not sure if victims were wearing avalanche beacons, which would transmit their locations, even under the snow.

A series of storms lasting over two weeks dropped 6-8 feet of wet, heavy snow on the Wasatch mountains, setting up prime avalanche conditions.

Even before Friday, this had already been one of the deadliest winters for avalanches in Utah since records were first kept in 1951. Before Friday six people had died in slides; no previous winter had seen more than six deaths.