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AVALANCHE DANGER

Tune your skis, then tune your mind with avalanche classes

In the summers I decompress and try not to think about avalanches. The problem is that I'm almost too good at it. Even after 12 years of forecasting, each fall my brain is fuzzy and rusty when it comes to snow. It's an annual predicament that I'll never get used to, but luckily there's a simple solution that works every October — I teach an avalanche course. Teaching forces me to remember things I'm embarrassed I forgot as well as become familiar with new research and techniques that I was too busy to digest last winter. The autumn is time to tune my skis and tune my mind.

If you are in a similar boat and need to brush up on avalanche skills, or even get educated for the first time, you are in luck. The Avalanche Center is offering an entire slate of avalanche courses in the next few months. Our most popular is a one-hour avalanche awareness lecture, a good primer before heading out into the backcountry. Skiers, boarders and snowmobilers who play in avalanche terrain should go even further and take a course with a field component.

Avalanches are all about timing — sometimes it's safe to play in avalanche terrain and other times it's not. The key is to know the difference. We offer an Introduction to Avalanches with Field Course a few times throughout the winter to help us make that distinction. This course involves five hours of lectures covering avalanche terrain recognition; the affect weather has on avalanche hazard; the development of the mountain snowpack; decision-making skills; and basic search and rescue procedures. Once outside we dig in the snow, learn stability tests, practice safe travel techniques and do a mock rescue. The lectures are an important foundation, but meaningful learning takes place when they are coupled with a field course. Equally, or possibly even more important than you taking the class, is getting your partner to tag along too; your survival could depend on their performance.

This year we are offering two sessions of our Introduction to Avalanches with Field Course at MSU for skiers and snowboarders. Evening lectures on Wednesday and Thursday, Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, are followed with a field course on Saturday at Bridger Bowl.

This class repeats on Jan. 25, 26 and 28.

We are also offering multiple Snowmobiler Introduction to Avalanches with Field Courses, too. Avalanches don't care if you're a skier or snowmobiler — the conditions for triggering them are the same. However, traveling in avalanche terrain and assessing snow stability on a sled is very different than a skier. These courses are offered

Thursday and Friday, Dec. 15 and 16 in West Yellowstone; in Bozeman over the weekend of Jan. 6 and 7.

Check the Calendar on the Education page of our website (mtavalanche.com) for more information and to register.

Besides taking avalanche classes there are a few other ways to help sharpen your avalanche focus. First, we have a webpage linking to some of the best online avalanche tutorials (/Education/Tutorials).

Although they are no substitute for hands-on experience, they are still worthy of a tour. And if you're someone who likes having a few books to thumb through, I can recommend two. "Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain," by Bruce Tremper offers in-depth analysis on avalanche formation and backcountry travel. The other book is "Snow Sense" by Fesler and Fredston. Karl Birkeland and I helped edit the new edition of "Snow Sense" which was just released in October. It's a small book full of information on terrain, weather, snowpack, decision making, backcountry travel and rescue. And for those who like watching a DVD, there's "The Fine Line" by rockymountainsherpas.com. This film is the best avalanche educational movie on the market. The footage is spectacular and the message is top notch.

Whether you take a class, read a book, study online or watch a movie, never forget that avalanche conditions change rapidly. Our job at the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center is to help you make good backcountry travel decisions by providing relevant and timely avalanche advisories every morning, all winter long. Sign up on our website for a free email subscription or bookmark the advisory page to stay updated on conditions. Get tuned up and let's all have a safe winter.

Doug Chabot is the director of the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center.



BY DOUG CHABOT