

Sacajawea Bowl Avalanche Incident

2 hunters caught, not buried, 1 injured
Custer Gallatin National Forest – November 5th, 2015

Synopsis

At 6:50 am on Thursday, November 5, 2015, two hunters were walking near the saddle of Sacajawea Peak after approaching from the Fairy Lake Trailhead on the east side of the Bridger Range. They were on the shoulder of the peak to the north (often referred to as Hardscrabble) at 9,000 feet elevation when they triggered an avalanche that broke 40-50 feet wide and 20 feet above them. They were carried 400 vertical feet (measured by their GPS) over a series of rocks ([photo](#)). One hunter was unconscious but came to. Although one was injured, they self-evacuated and drove to the emergency room where he was cleared of critical injuries.

Weather and Snowpack

A storm Monday and Tuesday (November 2 and 3) deposited 14 inches of snow, totaling 1.2 inches of SWE at the Brackett Creek SNOTEL, approximately three miles to the southeast of the slide. Wednesday night, westerly ridgetop winds averaged 30 mph with gusts of 36 mph at the Bridger Bowl Ski Area. Temperatures were in the teens Wednesday night. The avalanche advisory posted on Wednesday reported 14 inches of new snow plus strong winds that created wind slabs which could be triggered.

Analysis

Even small avalanches can have large consequences. Luckily these two hunters did not get buried or sustain life-threatening injuries, although being knocked unconscious illustrates the potential. When the snowpack is shallow there are exposed rocks and other natural hazards. Hunters typically focus on animals and not the snow conditions and do not usually carry avalanche rescue gear, though they regularly travel in avalanche terrain exposed to the same hazard as skiers. Crossing gullies one at a time does not guarantee a good outcome, but it does allow others to carry out a rescue. Avoiding avalanche terrain is the best way to mitigate the chances of getting caught.

Alex Marienthal of the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center obtained information for this report by phone the day of the incident from the individual who was caught and uninjured.

Please direct any questions regarding this report to mtavalanche@gmail.com or 406-587-6984.

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