

Get Wild: Ski area sidecountry is backcountry

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An access gate is pictured at a ski resort. Many people call these areas sidecountry since the gate can be accessed from a ski resort, but the terrain is not maintained, which means it is a backcountry area that has deadly risks like avalanches, cliffs and tree wells.

Anna DeBattiste/Courtesy photo

It was a Tuesday in February 2011, and three experienced backcountry skiers, all local to the Aspen area, were skiing in an out-of-bounds area in the East Snowmass Creek Valley. On their third run, they exited Snowmass Ski Resort from a backcountry access point off Sneaky's Run and skied into a steep and rocky area known as Sands Chute.

At the time, avalanche danger was listed as considerable for northwest through east-facing aspects at and above treeline, and the danger was worsened by high winds, which loaded more snow onto unstable slopes. The three skiers were wearing avalanche transceivers and carrying probes and shovels, and they skied the chute one at a time. It didn't matter, however. The avalanche that struck the second skier and carried him down the chute must have killed him very quickly because his friends found him and uncovered his head within about five minutes, but their efforts at CPR were not successful.

Due to high avalanche danger, it was a week before Mountain Rescue Aspen and the Snowmass Ski Patrol were able to recover the body. The coroner's final determination on cause of death was asphyxiation. Being experienced, well-equipped and able to find a buried subject within five minutes does not always make a difference in the outcome.

Since the 2009/10 season, the CAIC reports a total of 85 sidecountry avalanche accidents, 10 of them resulting in a fatality, representing almost 16% of fatal avalanche accidents in Colorado.

“Sidecountry” refers to a backcountry access point from a ski area. In Colorado, these access points are discussed and agreed upon between a ski area’s management team and the U.S. Forest Service. When there is an interest to designate a new access point, the ski area proposes the point in their annual operating plan, and the Forest Service approves it. The two primary goals are to provide reasonable opportunities for recreational access to public lands and to provide public education on the risks of using these access points.

It is rare that a backcountry access point is ever closed. It generally only happens when a ski patrol recommends a temporary closure due to ongoing rescue operations. A Forest Service supervisor would then make the decision to close an access point, and ski patrollers would staff it to enforce the closure.

It’s easy to be fooled into thinking that sidecountry terrain is somehow safer than the backcountry terrain accessed from a trailhead. It’s so easy to access, it’s right next door to the ski area and perhaps there are many skier tracks visible. All of this tricks us into thinking it must be safe. David Boyd, public affairs officer for White River National Forest, comments, “Even though these access points are relatively easy to get to, it’s like anywhere else in the backcountry where there is no avalanche mitigation work, and it’s up to the user to track avalanche conditions, understand the risks and have the proper equipment.”

Why don’t backcountry access points close during periods of high avalanche danger? Don Dressler, mountain resort program manager for the Forest Service, explains, “Closing a backcountry access point due to avalanche danger is a slippery slope because then when it’s open, people will think it must be safe. There are always hazards in the backcountry, and the goal is to educate users to assess and mitigate those risks on their own.”

Until 2011, Summit County had a much more restrictive boundary management policy than Eagle and Pitkin counties due to the deadly avalanche accident on Peak 7 in Breckenridge in 1987 that killed four skiers. But pressure to create more access points mounted because of problem areas where skiers were frequently ducking ropes. By placing access points in areas where people were cutting ropes illegally, skiers and riders leaving the resort would at least have to pass by warning signs informing them about the potential risks, including avalanches.

Avalanches are not the only potential hazard involved in leaving a ski resort through a backcountry access point. Snow immersion deaths — in which a person suffocates after falling into a tree well, a gap next to a rockface, or just into very deep snow — is also a concern.

The bottom line? Sidecountry is backcountry. Be prepared by reading the avalanche and weather forecasts, paying attention to warning signs, doing your homework on other potential hazards and skiing with avalanche equipment you know how to use and a buddy who can say the same. It’s about living to ski another day.

Anna DeBattiste is a volunteer public information officer with the Summit County Rescue Group and the Colorado Search and Rescue Association, both of which are 501(c)(3) nonprofits that rely on donations and grants for their operations. The all-volunteer rescue group never charges a fee for rescues.