

# Get Wild: Winter recreation safety in the wilderness

Columns [FOLLOW COLUMNS](#) | 2d ago

**Krista Hughes**  
**Get Wild**



Skiers are pictured ascending a route last winter in Summit County.

*Krista Hughes/Courtesy photo*

Colorado's population boom has put more winter recreationists into the wilderness than ever before.

For many, the desire to be outside in a beautiful setting doesn't go away just because there is snow on the ground. If anything, more people aspire to get outside during a season when much more time is typically spent inside. With close proximity to Denver, Summit and Eagle counties have seen significant increases in the number of winter hikers, snowshoers, backcountry skiers and snowboarders, and others recreating in wilderness.

With ski resorts feeling more crowded than ever, it is increasingly difficult to find the connection with nature one used to achieve by going to their local ski hill. As a result, people are turning to winter activities outside of the resorts, particularly in wilderness areas. As trailheads become just as busy in winter as they are in summer, users need to consider their impact on these areas, which used to



have few human visitors during the colder months, as well as the increased risk that comes with recreating in the winter, including hazards such as avalanches.

Animals are also experiencing more human visitors in their homes during winter than ever before. Human sightings and interactions put stress on animals, making winter a time when we need to be even more respectful of wildlife, as they are living in much harsher conditions than during summer and with less access to food. Additionally, we need to consider not just our human impact on animals, but also those of our four-legged friends. Obeying regulations about where to have a dog on a leash helps the wildlife remain healthy and undisturbed.

Winter comes with its own set of hazards. Avalanches, ice fall, frostbite and hypothermia are just a few of the things we don't have to think about as much during summer. Many associate avalanches with skiing and snowboarding; however, avalanches do not discriminate based upon your activity. Anyone can get caught in one if they are in an area where it is steep enough to slide and there is an unstable snowpack, for which Colorado is notorious. To learn more about the current snowpack conditions, check the Colorado Avalanche Information Center website at [Avalanche.State.co.us](https://Avalanche.State.co.us).

One thing to keep in mind when you are recreating in the wilderness is that you don't have to be directly on a steep slope to cause an avalanche. You can cause one from terrain that is adjacent to avalanche terrain. Typically, a slope needs to be steeper than 25 degrees for it to be able to slide. Even if you are not on a slope that is that steep, you might be standing directly below a steep slope and still find yourself in a dangerous situation.

There are avalanche education classes that are offered across the country that focus on teaching route selection and evaluating snow stability to minimize risk. A great place to start is the AIARE website at [AvTraining.org](https://AvTraining.org). Backcountry skiers and snowboarders are the most common wilderness users taking these classes, but they are equally relevant to anyone recreating in the wilderness in winter conditions.

Having proper education about how to recreate safely in the wilderness is arguably more important in winter than any other season. Preparation and education are paramount and will increase the likelihood you experience what we all hope the wilderness will bring us: a fun, safe and memorable day.



Krista Hughes



“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Krista Hughes is a volunteer and committee member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org).

**Support Local Journalism**

**DONATE**

