

Get Wild: When is a beacon not a beacon?

Anna DeBattiste



Justina Liss, trailhead outreach program coordinator for friends of CAIC, greets the Gish family visiting from Vail, with avalanche safety information at the Mayflower Gulch trailhead on Friday, Jan. 13th. When going out in the backcountry, it's important to know the difference between a beacon and an avalanche transceiver.

John Hanson/For the Summit Daily News

It was February 2010 and backcountry search and rescue teams and sheriff's offices across Colorado were getting frustrated.

Repeat signals from a personal locator beacon had been received since the previous December in locations from Berthoud Pass to Crested Butte. Each activation had caused the U.S. Air Force Rescue Coordination Center in Florida to notify the sheriff's office nearest the signal, and a search and rescue team had been called out to search for a person in distress. Because the personal locator beacon was not registered, as required by law, the U.S. Air Force Rescue Coordination Center was unable to determine who the owner was and so backcountry search and rescue teams had not been successful in finding anyone before the signal ceased.

Now it was Feb. 11, and the U.S. Air Force Rescue Coordination Center had just notified Colorado Search and Rescue Association's state coordinator that the same personal locator beacon had been activated again. It was the ninth time that winter. As Alpine Rescue Team began to gear up a team to search Berthoud Pass, the team's on-call mission coordinator made a sudden decision — he would not send a team on another fruitless search. Something was going on, but what was it? He began to plot the points on each "hit" of the personal locator beacon signal. Six were in the Berthoud Pass area in the late morning to early afternoon, then three more from a stationary position around 3 p.m. at the top of a chairlift in the Mary Jane area of Winter Park Ski Resort. It had moved from Clear Creek County to Grand County, so he notified Grand County Search and Rescue.

The mystery deepened. There were more hits throughout the late afternoon and early evening. Now they were coming from Golden and headed toward Boulder, so Alpine's coordinator notified Rocky Mountain Rescue Group in Boulder. Rocky Mountain Rescue Group's incident commander took over the lead and asked for assistance from the Boulder police department.

At around 9 p.m, the mystery was finally solved. Rocky Mountain Rescue Group found the personal locator beacon in a vehicle outside a restaurant where the owner was having dinner after a day of skiing. Interviews uncovered that the owner had been given the personal locator beacon as a birthday gift by a family member who knew he skied a lot, and he had never read the packaging to learn what it was. He thought it was an avalanche transceiver, so he turned it on whenever he went backcountry skiing. He had no idea that every time he did this he was broadcasting a distress signal to international satellites that sent the signal to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Air Force Rescue Coordination Center. The personal locator beacon was never on long enough for his exact location to be pinpointed, and this waste of resources might have dragged on for many more weeks if it weren't for the fact that he forgot to turn it off when he drove to Boulder for dinner that evening.

Vail Mountain Rescue Group reports a similar incident in 2019. Routt County Search and Rescue had another in 2022. The Routt County incident involved a man who rented a snowmobile from a local outfitter along with a "safety package" that included both a personal locator beacon and an avalanche transceiver. Not understanding which was which, he had turned on the personal locator beacon when he was out snowmobiling.

Here are some takeaways:

For backcountry recreationists, a personal locator beacon is a good thing to have (and an avalanche transceiver and rescue gear are a must if you recreate in avalanche terrain). Be sure, however, to read all personal locator beacon instructions and learn how to use it. Register the device and list emergency contacts — it's the law. We recommend considering a two-way satellite communication device rather than a personal locator beacon because of the ability to communicate with emergency contacts and rescuers, rather than just to send a one-way distress signal, as personal locator beacons do. Two-way satellite communication devices are more expensive, but they allow a rescue team to better target their response.

For outfitters, including a personal locator beacon and/or avalanche transceiver with your equipment rentals can be a good idea if you instruct your customers on usage. Register personal locator beacons to your business so we have a contact in case of an activation, and consider upgrading to two-way satellite communication devices. (If you include an avalanche transceiver, you must include an avalanche probe and shovel, and must provide adequate training.)

For all of us, words matter! Let's try to call an avalanche transceiver an avalanche transceiver and not a beacon.

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. 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.



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Anna DeBattiste/Courtesy photo