

Get Wild: Is early season backcountry travel safe?

Sports [FOLLOW SPORTS](#) | Dec 22, 2022

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An avalanche is pictured on Dec. 10 near No Name Peak on Loveland Pass. The fracture at the top of the slide was close to 10 feet high.

Summit County Rescue Group/Courtesy photo

The snow is here and the backcountry beckons. Whether skiing, boarding, snowshoeing or boot packing, the lure is hard to resist. Is it safe out there early in the season? It certainly can be.

Some people may think that until the snow builds up in prodigious amounts, it's hard to do anything that will get one in trouble. But you really need to dig a little deeper to determine what lurks beneath the surface — and by “dig a little deeper,” I mean that both figuratively and literally.

This short column is not meant to be a primer on avalanche safety. Such things as slope angles, route selection, how best to ski a route, safe zones, recent weather and wind conditions, and having the proper gear for companion rescue are best left to an avalanche safety class taught by professionals.

But there are a couple of other considerations worth noting.

Early season snow often sits on grass, and that snow may not adhere well to the subsurface. Although you might find some powder stashes in a favorite gully or lee side of a mountain, your concern should be how well that snow is anchored to the ground. If it breaks

Already this season there have been several avalanches reported in Summit County, both human caused and natural slides, some quite substantial. Fortunately for all involved, they have not resulted in any significant injuries. In the case of a recent slide on [Uneva Peak](#), the parties were able to ski out of the slide path. Both those skiers or boarders and the Summit County Rescue Group dodged a bullet that day.

You might be able to find a suitable line to ride on a slope not prone to slides. And there are certainly many of those in Summit County. But what lies just beneath the surface? Does an area have 15 inches of snow that is barely covering 13 inch rocks or downed trees?

Not many years ago, an early season ski accident [took the life of a man](#) skiing Quandary Peak. His fall resulted in his head impacting a rock just beneath the snow surface. The slope angle was not extreme and avalanche risk low. But the early season snow, although inviting, covered the danger beneath the surface.

Already this season Summit County has recently experienced “high” avalanche danger levels – that’s a danger level of 4 on a scale of 5. Early season can become as dangerous as midseason when the snow depths are far greater.

Whether early season or midseason, the ability of Summit County Rescue Group to respond to an accident is limited by time and distance. Always check the avalanche conditions with the [Colorado Avalanche Information Center](#)[↗]. You and your friends are your own best rescue team. Hone your beacon skills at our free beacon park at the Frisco Adventure Park and have your rescue gear (transceiver, probe and shovel) every time you venture into the backcountry.

If you set off a slide, please call the nonemergency number at dispatch to report it if there is no one caught: 970-668-8600. That can save a timely, expensive and risky search operation later that day or the following day. And by all means, enjoy the backcountry!



Charles Pitman joined the Summit County Rescue Group in 2004 and is one of 10 Mission Coordinators. He is also one of the team's public information officers and has served on the board of directors. Summit County Rescue Group, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, fielded 216 calls for assistance in 2021. The all-volunteer team of 70 members never charges a fee for rescues and relies on donations and grants for annual operations.

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