

Get Wild: Avalanche season has returned

News [FOLLOW NEWS](#) | 4 hrs ago

Stasia Stockwell
Get Wild



Stasia Stockwell skies on low-angle terrain below tree line during early season 2022. With weak layers of snow hidden beneath new accumulations, backcountry recreationists are cautioned to be extremely careful while skiing and riding on early season snow.
Jon Stockwell/Courtesy photo

As I slid my skis up the slope, I listened to the sound of the wind rustling through jumbles of pine needles on the trees around me. I pushed my skis through a few inches of light, fresh snow. Across the valley, the wind kicked up clouds of snow, even though the skies were clear, creating a glittering veil that opaquely covered the peaks of the Tenmile Range. The sun had just crested the peaks to the east and the ridgelines lit up with the pink hue of morning. It was just my partner and me, in a mellow zone far from any avalanche terrain, so we took our time and soaked up the sunrise before ripping skins and wiggling through the powder back to the trailhead.

What a treat it is when a snowstorm rolls through in early winter. The season has just begun, and winter-lovers are celebrating in excitement. And while all this fresh snow is great for many reasons, it's also a good time to remember one of the sobering realities of winter in Colorado: avalanches.

As usual, fickle Colorado weather has set up the snowpack like a house of cards. Colorado's light and fluffy snow makes for great skiing — but does the opposite for stability. The snow crystals that make that Champagne powder don't often bond well together, making our mountains more prone to avalanches. All that fresh snow and the layers that fell earlier in the season are just waiting for a trigger— a falling rock, a skier, a wild animal traversing through the snow — to send all that snow running down from the summits into drainages and meadows and valleys.

The clear and sunny weather that lingered after the first snows of the season brought on faceted snow crystals that don't offer much in the way of stability. In fact, those facets make the entire snowpack much weaker once they're buried by layers of new snow. These most recent storms, in particular, have loaded those early season weak layers and caused avalanche forecasters to issue avalanche warnings in various parts of the state, including the Gore and Front ranges.

Now, of course, this is not to say that we shouldn't play in the backcountry right now, but we must do so with a bit of extra caution. This is the time of year to explore mellow zones below 30 degrees in slope angle and to search for those powder stashes below tree line. Have some fun with it: seek out new spots you have yet to explore and get out with friends for some low-angle wiggles. Better yet, take this time to sharpen your skills. Dig some extra pits, always be verifying slope angles, and study the changes in the snowpack. Even if you're not getting high up in the alpine or ticking off pretty lines yet, you're still out there in the snow, and that's really what it's about.

On top of traveling with alertness, give your gear a good check. Ensure your avalanche transceiver is working properly, that your probe and shovel are in good condition. If you've never done so, enroll in an avalanche safety course, such as an AIARE Level 1. Refresh your avalanche safety knowledge by reading books, studying terrain, or even by taking a refresher course on avalanche rescue.

This is a beautiful time to be out. Travel slowly as you move through the mountains. Make observations, and simply enjoy the peacefulness of winter in the backcountry. There is no need to rush. Winter has just arrived, and it'll be here for a while now. Relish the early winter season, and stay safe in the backcountry.



Stasia Stockwell.
Jon Stockwell/Courtesy photo

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Stasia Stockwell is a Breckenridge local and avid backcountry skier. This column was provided by 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.

Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Now more than ever, your financial support is critical to help us keep our communities informed. Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

Your donation will be used exclusively to support quality, local journalism.

[DONATE](#)

