

Preparation and Execution
Tips for a great season in the Backcountry
By
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Heading out for a day in the hills is easy and rewarding unless we overlook a few simple preparations that if not practiced routinely can result in drastic consequences.

First---Being prepared starts at home. Make sure your equipment is operating correctly. One often overlooked detail is the lifespan of your avalanche transceiver batteries. Replace them at the start of every winter season, no matter how much use they received the previous winter. Know how to check the transceiver battery power, and when it drops below 50% change them. Never use rechargeable batteries in a transceiver due to the fact they wear out quickly and do poorly in the cold. In addition, an avalanche shovel and probe always accompany your transceiver. Make sure these important rescue tools assemble properly and did not get damaged during their long hibernation in the gear closet. Before heading into avalanche terrain do at least an hour or two of avalanche transceiver practice with your backcountry partners. Being familiar with all your equipment before you leave the house is a great way to ensure you make it home for dinner.

Gathering important backcountry information only takes a minute and is easily done at home. Know the phone number and website address of the local avalanche center. Stay updated on current local avalanche and weather conditions. Check the schedule of avalanche education classes offered in your community. Take at least one course geared toward avalanche education and safe backcountry travel.

Second---Preparation continues at the trail head. Communicate with your partners and make a plan for that specific day. This plan should be made around each individuals riding ability and from the information you received at home concerning weather and avalanche conditions. Know if the area you are riding in has cell phone coverage and which member of the team is carrying a cell phone. Communication between partners is often overlooked and can play a huge role in the outcome of the day.

When a plan has been made and everyone is comfortable with the agenda a transceiver check on every member needs to be conducted. This procedure is simple and only takes a minute. Turn all transceivers to transmit. One member then turns their transceiver to receive and checks for the loud beeping and blinking lights as he gets close to each individual. After transceivers have been turned on and checked they are strapped to the body under at least one piece of clothing. They are always turned on and applied at the car and never go into packs or on the outside of riding apparel. Other equipment checks on probes, shovels and first aid kits should also be done at the car.

Third---Use your preparations and knowledge to make it a safe day on the slopes. Terrain recognition and good route finding are essential skills for backcountry travel. When traveling on benign or non-avalanche terrain, it is important to pay attention to

private property and wilderness boundaries. Crossing these boundaries can result in a closure of the trail, a stiff penalty or both. Deep snow may make it difficult to recognize exact boundaries, but good map study and terrain recognition can help determine a safe and legal route.

Venturing into avalanche terrain requires clear communication and a team mentality. Exposing one rider at a time on avalanche prone slopes is imperative. Putting more than one rider on a slope dramatically increases the chance of triggering an avalanche. With one rider on the slope, the rest of the team needs to be in a safe zone with an unimpeded view of the rider at all times. This will allow a rapid response in case an avalanche does occur. Recognition of potentially dangerous slopes, terrain traps and islands of safety become an integral part of traveling in avalanche terrain.

Weather influences daily planning and preparations. Rapid weather changes can rapidly change the stability of the snowpack. Consistent observations of temperature, wind direction and precipitation should be routinely noted. It does not need to be snowing for the avalanche hazard to be increasing. Strong winds can load slopes quickly making them unpredictable and dangerous. Staying focused and aware of your surroundings will allow you to make safe decisions throughout the day.

Applying simple preparations to a well tuned baseline of skills is an effective way to ensure a safe and fun backcountry experience.

Avalanche Center Information

Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center (GNFAC), Bozeman, MT

Website address – mtavalanche.com

Observations – 406-587-6984

Advisory – 406-587-6981

The West Central Montana Avalanche Center, Missoula, MT

Website address – missoulaavalanche.org

Observations – 406-329-3752

Advisory – 406-549-4488

Glacier Country Avalanche Center, Kalsipell, Mt

Website address – glacieravalanche.org

Advisory – 406-257-8402

