Avalanche — Poor Position

California, Mt. Shasta, Hotlum-Wintun Route

On June 13, near the Hotlum-Wintun Route on the east side of Shasta, a male climber triggered a loose-wet avalanche at about 13,000 feet while glissading. The climber involved had separated from his group at around 3 p.m. and met a group of skiers who were descending from the summit. The skiers recommended the climber turn around due to the late hour. The climber agreed and quickly prepared to glissade. The slope the individual intended to glissade was a bit steeper than the route of ascent, and the snow was quite soft due to the hour of the day and warm, summer-like temperatures.

Shortly after the climber started his glissade, a point-release, loose-wet avalanche was triggered. It gained speed and entrained a considerable amount of snow and the climber. The avalanche grew to an estimated 150–200 feet wide and traveled close to 1,200 feet. The climber tried to use his axe to self-arrest, but was unable to stop. When the avalanche came to a rest, the climber managed to stay on top of the debris, but he had been battered by debris within the slide and sustained what—at the time—were considered minor injuries. He was able to self-rescue by gingerly hiking 4,000 feet down and three miles to the Brewer Creek trailhead. A visit to the hospital revealed two hairline femur fractures and a large contusion.

ANALYSIS

Spring and early summer conditions on Mt Shasta, while seemingly benign, can present several dangerous factors. Cold nights create firm snow in the morning, which can lead to long falls should one slip and fail to self-arrest. On the other hand, warm nights and hot days can exacerbate rockfall and make for very soft snow surfaces, resulting in loose-wet, point-release avalanches. Midafternoon on warm easterly and southerly aspects present the most favorable conditions for loose-wet snow instability. These slides start small but can quickly grow as they move downhill. A skier, glissading climber, or rockfall can easily start a loose-wet slide and sweep a person into rocks, over a cliff, or into a crevasse.

This climber should be commended for his self-rescue. Mt. Shasta is in close proximity to urban areas, but climbers need to remember that timely rescue is not always an option. Climbers should carry the proper equipment and have the appropriate skills to handle an emergency situation on their own. (Source: Mt. Shasta Wilderness Climbing Ranger Report 2015.)

Images

Point-release avalanches can be triggered by falling rock or ice, snow “rollers,” climbers, or skiers. They typically fan out and entrain more snow as they slide.

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