



AAC Publications

Avalanche

New Hampshire, Mt. Washington, Tuckerman Ravine

Two climbers and three skiers were involved in an avalanche in Tuckerman Ravine on Sunday, January 17. The two climbers, both from Canada, were ascending a gully called the Chute on the left side of the ravine. Four skiers and an avalanche class were nearby at the time. Just before 1 p.m., the pair climbed over an old fracture line, a foot to a foot and a half high, and continued into softer snow. After ascending approximately 30 feet through deeper snow, the climber in front felt that the slope might be unstable and decided to turn around. As they turned to descend, the slope fractured about 75 to 100 feet above them and approximately 75 to 100 feet wide. The two climbers were carried most of the distance to the ravine floor. Three nearby skiers also were caught and carried varying distances by the debris.

One of the two climbers sustained non-life-threatening injuries and was treated and released by snow ranger staff and the Mt. Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol. One of the skiers also received non-life-threatening injuries.

ANALYSIS

The Mt. Washington Observatory reported 5.5 inches of snow on the summit during the previous day, with around four inches falling at Hermit Lake at the base of Tuckerman Ravine. Summit winds blew 40–60 mph overnight from the west. The wind diminished to 20 mph as visitors began to enter Tuckerman. An avalanche bulletin posted on Saturday morning had accurately described recent and upcoming snowfall and wind loading in the area.

Although everyone involved in this incident was appropriately clothed for winter conditions and some of the individuals were equipped and trained to apply first aid to the injured, none of the five people caught in the avalanche was wearing beacons or carrying avalanche rescue gear. Sadly, this is not unusual in our terrain. Frequently, climbers leave behind avalanche rescue gear to save weight, leaving no quick course of action should burial occur.

Given the clustering of users near the Chute, it seems safe to assume that the “social proof” heuristic was at play. Following some discussion, the avalanche class chose to travel in steep terrain beneath a recently loaded slope. They were followed by the party of two climbers and the three skiers. Whether due to the easier travel following in someone else’s boot track, the erroneous assumption that a slope is safe because someone else already has traveled it, or the belief that other travelers know more than you, this behavior is all too common in Tuckerman Ravine.

Additional challenges exist when trying to rebalance risk on a continual basis, based on the actions of others outside your control. Mt. Washington has very concentrated avalanche terrain and a high amount of visitation. Your party’s movements may be under tight control and stay within your chosen level of accepted risk, but only in the absence of other, more unpredictable people. An associated concern is the challenge of spreading out to reduce overall risk in a relatively confined area.

The two climbers overlooked a red flag when they climbed over a recently reloaded crown line and onto a slope that rises from 40° to 45° or more. Moreover, all parties involved in the Chute incident crossed beneath this slope within four hours of a period of active loading. While everyone chooses

their own level of acceptable risk, it is unclear whether all parties involved had sought the information needed to make an informed decision by reading the posted General Avalanche Bulletin or seeking recent weather data. (Source: Mount Washington Avalanche Center.)

Images



Rescuers probe the debris of an avalanche in Tuckerman Ravine that caught five people in its path.

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