



## AAC Publications

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### **Carried Into Terrain Trap — 'Low' Hazard, Skiing Alone**

New Hampshire, Mt. Washington, Ammonoosuc Ravine

**At around 7 a.m. on Wednesday, February 3, 2021, a New Hampshire Fish and Game officer contacted the Mount Washington Avalanche Center to ask for assistance in locating the vehicle of an individual who had been reported missing the previous night.** Ian Forgays, a 54-year-old male from Vermont, had texted friends on Monday, February 1, to say he planned a day of backcountry skiing on the west side of Mt. Washington, either in Ammonoosuc Ravine or Monroe Brook, prior to the start of a significant winter storm arriving that night.

Forgays' vehicle was found at the Ammonoosuc Ravine trailhead at 10 a.m. on Wednesday morning. A ground search was organized while team leaders analyzed texts and photos the subject sent to friends in order to produce a likely timeline of events; this helped focus efforts on the area surrounding Ammonoosuc Ravine. Avalanche hazard on Wednesday morning was forecast as Considerable, following High danger the previous day. Light freezing rain and snow showers were falling at higher elevations in the search area. Small teams of three or four were sent to several likely locations to begin the ground search.

By early afternoon, advanced cell phone forensics narrowed the last known point of the subject's cell phone to an area almost directly above the main drainage of the Ammonoosuc. As searchers left the hiking trail and made their way up the drainage, they found debris and some broken trees that were evidence of recent slide activity, most likely from a widespread avalanche cycle on Tuesday, one day after the subject skied the area. At 4:25 p.m., a beacon signal was acquired by a searcher with a dog and Recco receiver beneath the largest west-northwest-facing slope of the Ammonoosuc, at around 3,950 feet. Pinpoint search techniques with an avalanche transceiver located a beacon signal 3.8 meters (12 feet 6 inches) beneath the debris, which had piled up against the face of an overhanging rock buttress.

Rescuers began to dig and probe, and as more rescuers arrived and lowered the grade of the snow by more than a meter, a probe strike was finally confirmed. Eight rescuers took turns digging for an hour and 35 minutes. When they reached the subject's body, the teams extricated it from the deep hole, lowered the subject down two pitches of steep snow and ice, and then shifted to a SKED rescue litter for transport to the road. An autopsy later identified asphyxia as the cause of death.

### **ANALYSIS**

Texts to the Forgays' friends stated that he planned to "take advantage of low avy danger and low winds up high," prior to the onset of the winter storm. By 9 a.m. on Monday, the skier had reached treeline on Mt. Monroe, and by 11 a.m. he was near the summit of Mt. Washington. He then headed for the ravine.

On the day the subject went skiing, the avalanche danger for the area was rated as Low. Conditions included a mix of snow surfaces, ranging from ice to rimed snow to firm wind slabs, all of which are commonplace in the wind-raked alpine areas and steep ravines of the Presidential Range. The layers beneath included a widespread, wind-hammered surface dubbed the "157 Layer," after the 157 mph peak wind speed on January 24 that helped create it. Above that layer was another, softer wind slab, described in the February 1 forecast as "...smooth, hollow sounding slabs (that) are easy to identify." The Bottom Line of the forecast stated, "The potential for small avalanches of wind-drifted snow

remains in isolated areas at mid and upper elevations.”

It is likely that Forgays triggered one of these isolated pockets and then was carried into a bowl-like depression, where the snow was stopped by an over- hanging cliff that was angled upslope. The debris pile here was deep but fairly narrow, fanning out from a 10-foot strip to about 25 feet wide by 40 feet long.

The week prior to Forgays’ burial had brought only four inches of snow total to the Mt. Washington summit, with relatively low wind speeds. The cold nights and some wind loading did create slabs, but they were relatively small in size. An examination of the crown of the Forgays avalanche wasn’t possible, since extreme winds and new snow the following day erased all the signs. Weather factors and observations from other areas suggest a small (D1) wind slab was most likely.

Information provided by family and friends indicates that Forgays had skied Mt Washington hundreds of times. His choice to ski that day seems informed and intentional, and his past ski missions with friends reflected an enthusiasm for any sort of skiing adventure.

Accidents like this serve as a stark reminder of the role that luck can play in our backcountry endeavors. Finding a triggerable slab in mostly safe avalanche conditions is rare but not unheard of, especially due to our [local] mountains’ spatially variable wind slab avalanche problem. Accurately assessing snow and terrain and avoiding trouble throughout a lifetime of playing in the mountains is a tremendous challenge for anyone, even for the most experienced.

A skiing partner might have saved Ian Forgays’ life when he triggered a small wind slab, but given the terrain trap below, maybe not. Forgays was equipped with avalanche safety gear, including an avalanche transceiver, which helped rescuers and the family immensely. But it is important to remember that even the most experienced skiers with all the correct preparations and equipment risk more when skiing alone. If there are lessons to be learned from this accident, they aren’t new. Skiing technical lines, in a thin snowpack above a notorious terrain trap, with no partners, even on a Low danger day, raises the stakes tremendously. (Source: Frank Carus, lead snow ranger, Mount Washington Avalanche Center.)

[Read the full report from Mount Washington Avalanche Center.](#)

## Images



A rescuer begins to probe just after a Recco and beacon search found a signal four meters beneath the snow in Ammonoosuc Ravine. The avalanche path is the narrow strip of snow in the background, between the ice on the left and the boulders on the right.

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