



AAC Publications

Mid-Tour Change of Plans

Colorado, Sawatch Range, Mt. Peck

On March 10, 2022, two backcountry riders set out for an outing near Mt. Peck (12,208 feet), about 1.5 miles southeast of Monarch Pass. Rider 1 traveled on skis and Rider 2 on a snowboard. They brought their dog along for the tour. The plan was to ascend the northwest ridge of Mt. Peck to near the summit and possibly descend lower-angle terrain along the northeast ridge into the North Fooses Creek drainage.

During their ascent, they decided instead to descend a steep northeast-facing slope before reaching the summit. Rider 1 skied a short distance down in forested terrain on the skier's right side of the slope. Rider 2 then descended a short distance past Rider 1, still staying in the trees. They commented on the lack of a slab and no cracking or collapsing, and decided to finish their descent further skier's left, down steeper and more open terrain. They identified a point to meet in low-angle terrain about 500 feet downslope from the steeper headwall. Rider 2 descended first and stopped at the regroup point without incident. Rider 1 then sent the dog down, who reached Rider 2 safely.

As Rider 1 began his descent, he triggered an avalanche on his second turn. He was immediately swept off his feet and deployed his airbag. He was carried around 400 vertical feet before ending up against a tree, lying on his side with avalanche debris covering his face. He was able to free an arm and clear his face after "an eternity of seconds." He had lost one ski.

Rider 2 described the collapse of the slope as severe enough to knock her over while standing with her feet strapped into her snowboard. She could see the avalanche coming, but did not have time to deploy her airbag. The avalanche washed over her and the dog, carrying her down the slope. When the avalanche stopped, she was face down and covered by less than a foot of snow. A portion of her helmet and snowboard were visible on the surface. She had been buried with one hand very close to her face, and she was able to pull off her glove with her teeth and move her fingers enough to clear snow from her face. She started yelling for Rider 1, who quickly located and extricated her.

The riders began looking for their dog, but there were no visible clues or tracks in the area. They probed the debris for approximately an hour, but did not locate the dog. They made the difficult decision to leave the scene and head back to the trailhead, strapping a shovel to Rider 1's foot so he could make his way out with just one ski.

Two days after the accident, motorists came upon the dog near the top of Monarch Pass. He was reunited with the owners.

ANALYSIS

The avalanche occurred on a very steep (40°) north-facing slope near treeline. It was a hard slab avalanche, medium-size relative to the path. The avalanche broke three to five feet deep on a layer of faceted crystals that were first buried by a storm on February 21. As the avalanche ran, it gouged down into snow layers near the ground in the steepest and rockiest areas of the path.

The Colorado Avalanche Information Center's (CAIC) forecast for the Sawatch zone on the day of the avalanche was Considerable (Level 3) danger near and above treeline and Moderate (Level 2) below

treeline. After a series of storms in the preceeding couple of weeks, accompanied by moderate to strong winds, slab avalanches were listed as the first problem in the forecast.

The pair of riders was aware of dangerous avalanche conditions and read the avalanche forecast the morning of the accident. They had toured in the Monarch Pass area several days earlier and dug a snow profile on a similar aspect and elevation to the slope that avalanched. They did not observe any obvious signs of instability traveling along the ridge nor on their descent of the upper slope. They committed to a very steep slope based in part on these limited observations—obvious signs of instability are not always present before you trigger an avalanche.

An important factor is that they deviated from their original plan by choosing a steeper descent while on their tour. Numerous accidents can be attributed to groups changing their plans on the fly and traveling into terrain they had previously ruled out as too dangerous.

The pair chose their regroup location based on observations of avalanches on the slope in previous years. However, this avalanche broke deeper and wider than they anticipated, and the debris ran over Rider 2 at the regroup point. Avalanches failing on persistent weak layers can break in surprising ways, and it is critical to give steep terrain wide buffers to address this uncertainty.

We do not know if the dog was buried and dug himself out of the avalanche debris or if he was spooked by the event and ran from the scene. It is a surprising and happy outcome that the dog made his way back to the trailhead and eventually was reunited with the pair. Only the dog will ever know the full story of what happened. (Source: Colorado Avalanche Information Center.)

Read the avalanche center report.

DOGS IN AVALANCHE TERRAIN

During the 2021-22 season, in Colorado alone, three dogs were killed in avalanche incidents along with human companions. In other cases, dogs—and their owners—narrowly escaped avalanches. In one incident at the popular Berthoud Pass riding zone, on December 26, 2021, a dog triggered an avalanche that swept it about 300 yards to the bottom of a chute and buried the animal. The owner and witnesses initially used their transceivers to search for potentially buried people, and then, finding nothing, they probed for 15 to 20 minutes until, happily, one of them found the dog alive and unharmed.

Many dogs love snow, and winter travel with a pet can be a joyful experience. But dogs that aren't trained for avalanche duty can easily run into a hazardous area, and animal companions add complexity to decision-making and a significant element of uncertainty in avalanche terrain. (The slide triggered by the dog at Berthoud Pass had the potential to bury any skier below, and the search for the buried pooch exposed several people to additional risk.) If you choose to travel in avalanche terrain with a dog, the animal should be highly responsive to voice commands. Terrain choices should be more conservative than usual. And dogs should never be outfitted with an avalanche beacon. We love our pets, but a signal from a pet's beacon could cause a life-threatening delay to the search for possible buried people. —The Editors

Images



Apollo triggered an avalanche above Berthoud Pass, Colorado, and was buried but recovered

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