



AAC Publications

AVALANCHE – Triggered from Below During Ascent

New York, Adirondacks, Wright Peak

On February 12, a large (R4, D2.5) skier-triggered avalanche occurred on the lookers-right slide path in the Angel Slides area on the shoulder of Wright Peak (4,587'). This slide path faces northeast and was created as a result of Tropical Storm Irene in the summer of 2011. The Angel Slides are a popular backcountry skiing destination and are named after Toma Vracarich, who was killed in an avalanche while skiing these slides in 2000.

The two skiers triggered the avalanche while ascending the slide path. The crown was estimated to be as much as 80 cm (2.5') deep and reached approximately 150 feet across the entirety of the slope. By the skiers' estimation, the slide released approximately 500 feet above them, at about 3,750 feet in elevation.

Both skiers were caught and carried approximately 150 feet. Skier 1 likely experienced a brief loss of consciousness; they regained consciousness with an airway partially obstructed by snow. They were able to extract themselves from their partial burial after five minutes.

Skier 1 turned their beacon to search and got an initial reading of nine meters. Skier 1 completed a beacon search and located Skier 2, with the lowest beacon reading being greater than one meter. Skier 1 began to dig and found Skier 2 fully buried and inverted. They were able to dig their partner out partially, estimating that approximately 10 to 15 minutes passed from the time of the accident to when Skier 2's airway was clear. Skier 2 was unresponsive and breathing faintly. As Skier 1 continued to dig their partner out, Skier 2 regained consciousness.

Despite the accident and loss of consciousness, neither skier had any obvious indications of additional trauma. They were able to extract themselves from the woods, despite the loss of some of their gear.

ANALYSIS

Skiers and climbers in the Adirondacks face the challenge of not having a local center for avalanche forecasting and observations. The Adirondack Community Avalanche Project website was formed to help address the lack of relevant avalanche information. It does not publish forecasts, but instead works to share community-reported observations that may be helpful to other skiers and climbers.

On February 15, a few days after the incident, the Adirondack Community Avalanche Project team went to the site to assess the scene and snowpack. The team dug a snow pit to the ground at 3,300 feet on the same slide that had previously avalanched. They found a 70cm-deep snowpack and completed a compression test and extended column test. The test results reflected a fracture that propagated across the full column. The tests failed consistently on a persistent weak layer 60cm deep, and it appears this was the layer on which the avalanche slid. Other skiers had previously reported this layer to the Adirondack Community Avalanche Project.

This accident occurred while the skiers were skinning up the slide path, not skiing down. A study of avalanche fatalities in the United States between 2009 and 2017 by Evelyn Lees found that 32 percent of fatalities happened during the ascent. Although skinning what you'll ski has the advantage of

allowing you to preview conditions, it can put you in the line of fire on an untested slope. Choose terrain carefully, especially when conditions are conducive to the formation of hard slab avalanches, which are more likely to trigger from below.

Despite the accident, the skiers did many things right. They carried the necessary equipment to complete a rescue, and Skier 1 undoubtedly saved the life of their partner. This is believed to be the first “save” of a fully buried avalanche victim in the Northeast. (Sources: Nate Trachte and Caitlin Kelly, Adirondack Community Avalanche Project.)

Images



The Angel Slides on the northeast side of Wright Peak. The avalanche in this report occurred on the right-hand slide path.



The aftermath of a large slide on the northeast aspect of Wright Peak. Two skiers (who wished to remain anonymous) were buried. They self-rescued and escaped serious injury.

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