Near Miss Glissading — Hidden Snow Hole

Washington, Cascade Mountains, Stevens Pass

On May 10 around 1:30 p.m., during a basic mountaineering course at Stevens Pass, the lead instructor (44) had a close call while preparing a glissading practice area. Prior scouting found significant snowmelt, running water, and thin snow bridges in the area. After he identified an apparently suitable slope, the lead instructor tested the path by glissading through it.

About 20 feet into the descent, a snow bump caused a deviation from the intended line. The instructor then encountered a hidden snow hole concealing a rushing creek and fell partially into a two-foot-diameter opening. He was assisted by the team and emerged unharmed. After the incident, running water could be heard above and below the hole. The instructors repositioned in a new practice area for the remainder.

ANALYSIS

This incident shared terrain with a well-documented spring-snowpack hazard. Spring conditions hide voids that run with water, invisible from the surface. As with crevasses, these are difficult to detect by visual inspection.

Contributing Factors

*Significant recent snowmelt in the area.

*Hidden water beneath snow bridges.

*Deviation from intended path due to a surface irregularity.

*Inadequate assessment of snow-bridge stability.

Preventive Measures

*The team could have chosen a slope with no possibility of underlying water.

*A more thorough probing would have supplemented visual inspection.

*A useful check would be to listen for rushing water under the snowpack.

*Given the conditions, the team could have practiced an alternative skill.

Positive Actions

*Prior scouting and briefing established awareness of changing conditions.

*The lead instructor tested the route before allowing students to attempt it.

*The team responded quickly, to assist.

*Clear boundaries were established and maintained.

*Post-incident, instructors repositioned the new practice area in a safer locale.

This incident reminds us that even experts can make mistakes. (Source: Don Sarver.)

Images

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