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Locals escape avalanche scare

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Most people in Northeast Oregon don't think about avalanches happening in their own backyard - especially those who ski at local ski resorts.

During the weekend of Jan. 11-12, multiple avalanches were seen across the Wallowa and Elkhorn mountains, including one near Rock Creek Butte that caught local snowmobilers in its path of destruction.

Local snowmobilers Dustin Stephens of Baker City, Wil Burgess of Elgin and another snowmobiler who requests to remain anonymous, were caught in the flow of a fairly large avalanche on Jan. 12.

Rick Stephens and Ryan Davilla were also snowmobiling with them that day, but were not involved in the slide.

Dustin Stephens was unsure how long the slide lasted because he "was in it."

"It seemed like forever when you can't breathe," Stephens said. "My initial thoughts were my friends. It was a screaming match for a few moments after the snow settled trying to find out if everyone was accounted for."

The five friends were snowmobiling on a northeast-facing slope in an area known as Rock Creek Canyon, which is deep in the Elkhorn Mountains about 15 miles northwest of Baker City.

Dustin Stephens said the avalanche, which occurred around 2 p.m., slid down half to three quarters of the entire ridge at 7,000 feet elevation.

"It broke in the middle right at my track I made while I was on the hill. The bottom slid for around a second before the whole top broke loose as well," Stephens said.

Wil Burgess describes the moment when snow broke at the top of the ridge, about 500 yards above where Stephens was snowmobiling, and then came down on them, burying Burgess up to his face in snow and ripping both their helmets off.

"The first time it hit, it took me down about 75 yards, and my sled down 200 yards," Burgess said. "It was like someone shoving me straight down in the snow; like a 700-pound guy on top of me."

Burgess said the avalanche was approximately 1,000 feet in length, as it started near the top and slid almost all the way down to the bottom.

The group, except for one member, were all wearing avalanche beacons, devices used to locate individuals in the event they get buried in a slide. Those four individuals were also carrying probes and shovels-- items also carried by backcountry snowmobilers and skiers for avalanche rescue effects.

One day earlier, on Jan. 11, local backcountry skiers Brian Sather and Zachary Heath were skiing into Mule Peak, in the Wallowa Mountains, to do snow study for the Wallowa Avalanche Center (WAC).

As observers, Sather and Heath, both certified in snow study and observation by the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education, dig into the snow to study the conditions, make an assessment on how dangerous the conditions are, and then report it to the Wallowa Avalanche Center.

"It was snowing profusely; the winds were so strong we were scared to ski anything steep," Sather said. "The next day we saw at least six natural slides. They were all on different aspects, not just one specific aspect."

Lack of experience didn't play a role in the avalanche incident at Rock Creek on Sunday. All the snowmobilers had at least five years of experience. Dustin Stephens has been riding for 15 years, the past 10 "seriously."

"I have been riding since I could give it gas by myself. Haha," Stephens wrote in a Facebook message to La Grande Weather Service, a major contributor to WAC.

Snow was forecasted for all the mountain ranges in Northeast Oregon over the weekend, with major accumulations likely. This snowfall greatly contributed to the avalanche danger over the weekend. According to Stephens, there was heavy snow falling with lots of new snow. There was a wind blown bowl on top of an icy, first-layer. Similar conditions were seen in the Wallowa's with a few feet of snow on top of a thin ice, or graupel, layer.

"Over the weekend we forecasted for mainly snow in the upper elevations with a high amount of precipitable water. Combined with the graupel event that occurred earlier this year the conditions were ripe for an avalanche breakout," said meteorologist Anthony Marro, a Lead Forecaster at La Grande Weather Service, Inc., who oversees the company's forecasting operations.

"(The) snow was great!" said Burgess. "We were being cautious in that area; watching each other three of four times."

Both Burgess and Stephens mentioned thinking "this was the end" or "I'm a goner" during the avalanche, but came away from the incident with more knowledge than when he had set out that day.

"We are very fortunate, and certainly learned a lot from what happened," says Stephens. "I think that one of the main things we will take away from this is to not push it in these conditions, and secondly, be on the hill one person at a time, so that when things like this happen it's not a large group of people in a potentially deadly situation."

"People don't understand the power behind those," Burgess said. "I know I sure didn't, and have never felt anything like that before. I have an (avalanche) beacon, but I would like to become more familiar with it."

While avalanches are inevitable, even in Northeast Oregon, there are ways to minimize human casualties in the event of a slide.

Wallowa Avalanche Center, based in Joseph, didn't comment directly on the Rock Creek incident, but Director Keith Stebbings recommended that backcountry recreationists use the WAC website to help prevent future incidents, as it is "super advantageous" and has a "plethora" of information on it.

"We feel that avalanche education is the first step in awareness in avalanche safety in the backcountry," said Stebbings. "Secondly, understand the importance of rescue equipment, how to use it, and always carry it with you."

Backcountry recreationists can find reports and avalanche information online at www.wallowaavalanchecenter.org. (<http://www.wallowaavalanchecenter.org>)

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