

Date: 01/19/19

Location:

Cutthroat Drainage, Washington Pass Area, North Cascades

Public Avalanche Forecast:

Considerable Danger: <https://www.nwac.us/avalanche-forecast/avalanche-region-forecast/5441/cascade-east-north/>

Description (Report compiled by NWAC with information provided by parties involved):

Two skiers in a guided group of five were caught in an avalanche while approaching First Bowl. The avalanche failed naturally within new snow (classified as SS-N-R3-D2 by the reporting party), likely due to high loading rates as spindrift collected at the base of the buttress.

Details:

The skiers were spaced ~30ft apart on an ascending traverse on a westerly aspect at ~5800ft. The route crossed through a slide path with widely spaced trees (Picture 1). Conditions were stormy. At around 11 am an avalanche released above the party (crown below the overhead buttress). Skier 1 was caught and carried downslope, pinned against a tree (Picture 2), partially buried (airway under the snow), and suffered trauma to his back and side. Skier 2 was on the edge of the slide, lost both skis, was buried up to his waist against a small tree, and sustained minor bruising to his arms.

The guide placed skiers 3 and 4 in a safe position. Skier 2 was able to get out of the debris and could see Skier 1's arm. The guide and Skier 2 made their way to Skier 1, cleared his airway, and used a shovel to remove enough snow so that they could disentangle him from the tree. An avalanche beacon search was not needed. Skier 2 lost both skis and Skier 1 lost one ski. Skier 1 was hurt but mobile, and the group was able to share equipment and self-extricate.

The injuries sustained by Skier 1 include a severe contusion to the upper glute, 2nd degree ankle sprain, and three broken ribs. Because gear was lost, three of the party had to make the trek to motorized transport on a single ski.

Take-Home Points:

1. The amount and rate of snowfall and wind transport were higher than anticipated. Alpine buttresses (and the terrain features beneath them) commonly shed during storms. Factoring this into terrain selection and management may have reduced the group's exposure.
2. Having the group spaced out along the traverse into First Bowl minimized the number of people caught in the avalanche but did not eliminate the hazard or limit the exposure to a single individual.
3. The group was able to self-rescue and exit the field. More serious injuries or more difficult conditions may have resulted in a situation where SAR resources were needed. The group carried a satellite phone and VHF radios to communicate with other guides in the area and the local heli ski operation. Weather conditions would not have allowed for a helicopter rescue which increased the group's vulnerability. The guide also carried a rescue sled and there was a rigid sled stashed near the snowmobiles. The group used the rigid sled to transport Skier 1 to the trailhead.
4. From Skier 1: "I learned that I don't want to be in another avalanche. Regardless of whether I am in a guided group, or on a personal trip, I need to think for myself and communicate and align risk tolerance within my group."

Picture 1. Looking up the slide path.



Picture 2. Tree where Skier 1 was pinned.

