

Bear Claw Avalanche Accident

Southern Teton Range, Wyoming; December 20, 2025

Avalanche deaths affect many mountain towns every year. Recreationalists, rescuers and their families can be traumatized directly or indirectly. Help is available for those involved and those adjacent to these tragedies. Find more information on mental health first aid and other resources [here](#) or at your local public mental health office.

Avalanche Comments

On Saturday, December 20, 2025 at approximately 2:00pm, one skier in a party of two unintentionally triggered an avalanche on a north-facing, steep, rocky, and sparsely treed chute known as the Claw (43.48332, -110.94696) approximately two miles south of the main parking lot at Teton Pass. The terrain was wind-loaded with drifts along the crest of the ridge and piles of wind-driven sluff debris beneath short rock outcroppings. The party triggered a small slab avalanche at the top of a larger, adjacent northeast facing gully before skiing into the top of a smaller feature. The lead skier performed a ski-cut to test stability and then began to ski the slope. After one or two turns, the slope failed above the skier, about 65 feet across the 40 to 45 degree slope. The debris ran 1,000 feet (600' vertical fall) to the base of the avalanche path, carrying and critically burying the first skier among trees. The crown face appeared to average one and a half feet in thickness (SS-AS(u)-R3-D2).

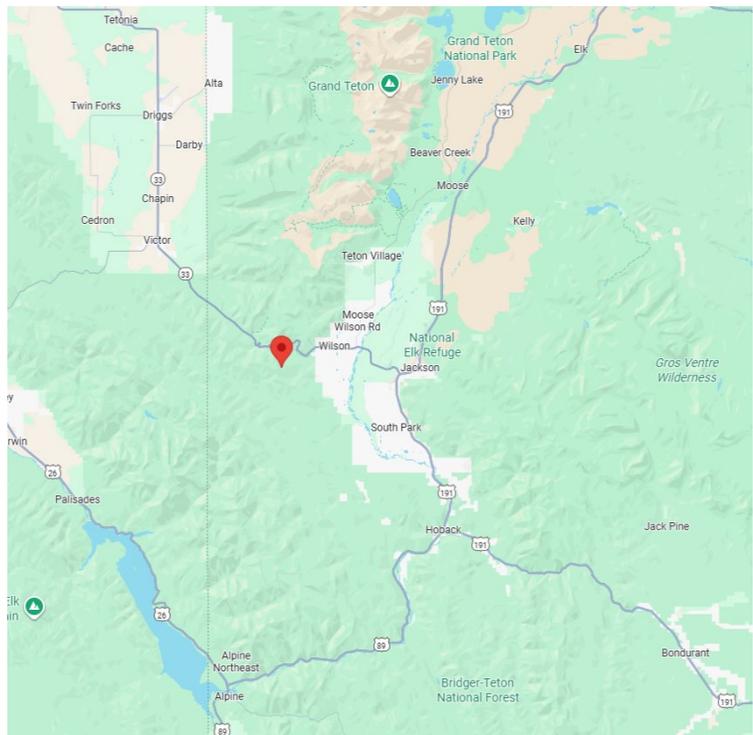


Figure 1 The accident site, south of Teton Pass, in western Wyoming.

Backcountry Avalanche Forecast

The Bridger-Teton Avalanche Center forecast on December 20th for the Teton forecast zone was rated Considerable (3 out of 5) above 7,500' in elevation. The primary avalanche problem was wind slab which was shown on all aspects, including all aspects of the middle elevation band, due to the prolonged period of extreme winds. Avalanches were listed as likely to be triggered and D1-2.5 in size (small to large/very large). The Bottom Line section of [the day's forecast](#) read, "skiers and riders have the potential to trigger slab avalanches in steep terrain

above 8,000' on a variety of aspects. Avoid areas with obvious signs of wind loading however any steep terrain is suspect and requires snowpack evaluation."

The wind slab avalanche problem description elaborated on the situation as follows:

Approximately 2-3 feet of heavy snow has fallen since Tuesday. This snowfall was accompanied by very strong southwest to northwest winds with gusts of 60-90 mph each day and lies upon hard and slick crusts on all aspects.

Yesterday natural and human triggered slides were reported including an avalanche on Teton Pass that impacted traffic. Backcountry travelers can easily trigger hard or soft slab avalanches today that could fail on the crusts or on density breaks within the recent snow with depths to 3 feet.

The old weak snow buried in early November is not expected to be active at this time and will continue to be monitored.

The last line of the problem description refers to a persistent layer of faceted snow formed in November and buried by subsequent storms. Persistent slab had been a listed avalanche problem until the 18th when it was removed from the forecast due to a lack of recent avalanche activity and the difficulty in triggering these layers given the snowpack structure at the time.

Weather and Snowpack Summary

Several atmospheric river events occurred during December. Two major storm events, with Winter Storm Warnings issued, started December 5th and 17th. Both these storms produced heavy, dense snowfall in the middle and upper elevations. Lower elevations experienced warm temperatures and rain. The storm on December 5th produced widespread rain and rime across all elevations including the uppermost elevations of the Tetons which bridged over and or crushed and wetted the weak layers formed in November rendering those weak layers largely unreactive. The widespread rain/rime crust that formed also connected the discontinuous, shallow snowpack and made the surface hard and slick.

The next series of storms began on December 17th with warm temperatures. The December 17th storm would produce 3-4" of snow water equivalent with snow densities varying between 10-20%. Twenty inches of snow was recorded at the Raymer snow study plot, elevation 9,500', located 8 miles to the north. Twenty-one inches collected at Mount Baird, 11 miles to the southwest. The sites accumulated 10 and 6 inches respectively the day prior to the incident.

This series of Pacific disturbances also brought extreme winds to the area. Maximum gusts hit 90 mph from the WNW three days earlier, then 68 mph from the SW and 47 mph from the WSW in the two days leading up to the incident. The winds were sustained as well with average speeds of 32 mph from the WSW the prior day and overnight. The velocity of the wind event toppled trees in valley locations and built wind slabs in more typically sheltered locations. Buffalo Bowl at 7,927' at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort recorded gusts to 50 mph (Fig. 2).

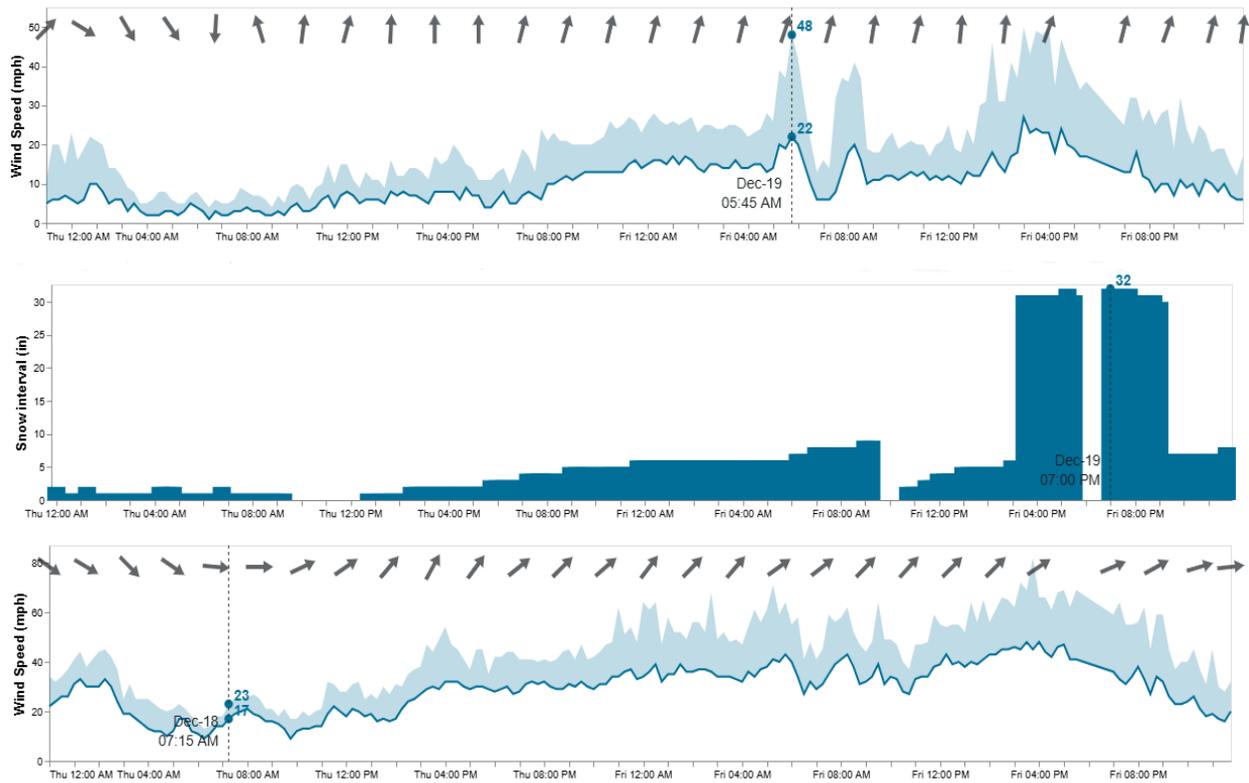


Figure 2 Graphics of snow and wind during the previous two days. Winds at Buffalo Bowl are shown above the snowfall collected at Rendezvous snow plot. Rendezvous summit winds are shown below.

Four avalanches were reported the day prior to the accident, two of which were human-triggered. One of these occurred a half mile from the site. This avalanche occurred within the accumulating new snow in a density break several inches above the December 10th rain crust. The second avalanche was intentionally triggered on an east facing aspect at 8600' in Grand Teton National Park. This avalanche also initiated at a density break above the December 10th rain crust. These avalanches were one to one-and-a-half feet in thickness.

Accident Summary

Forest Service avalanche centers across the country have a long history of providing what we hope are accurate, thorough and objective fatality reports to create clarity and in some cases closure for those affected by these tragic accidents. These reports also offer an opportunity to better understand human behavior and avalanches and have contributed to a critical body of research. Additionally, avalanche forecasting and education have been shown to reduce avalanche fatalities. The sharing of accident information contributes greatly to this effort. The following summary contains only details shared during a conversation with the responding deputy who spoke to the surviving skier.

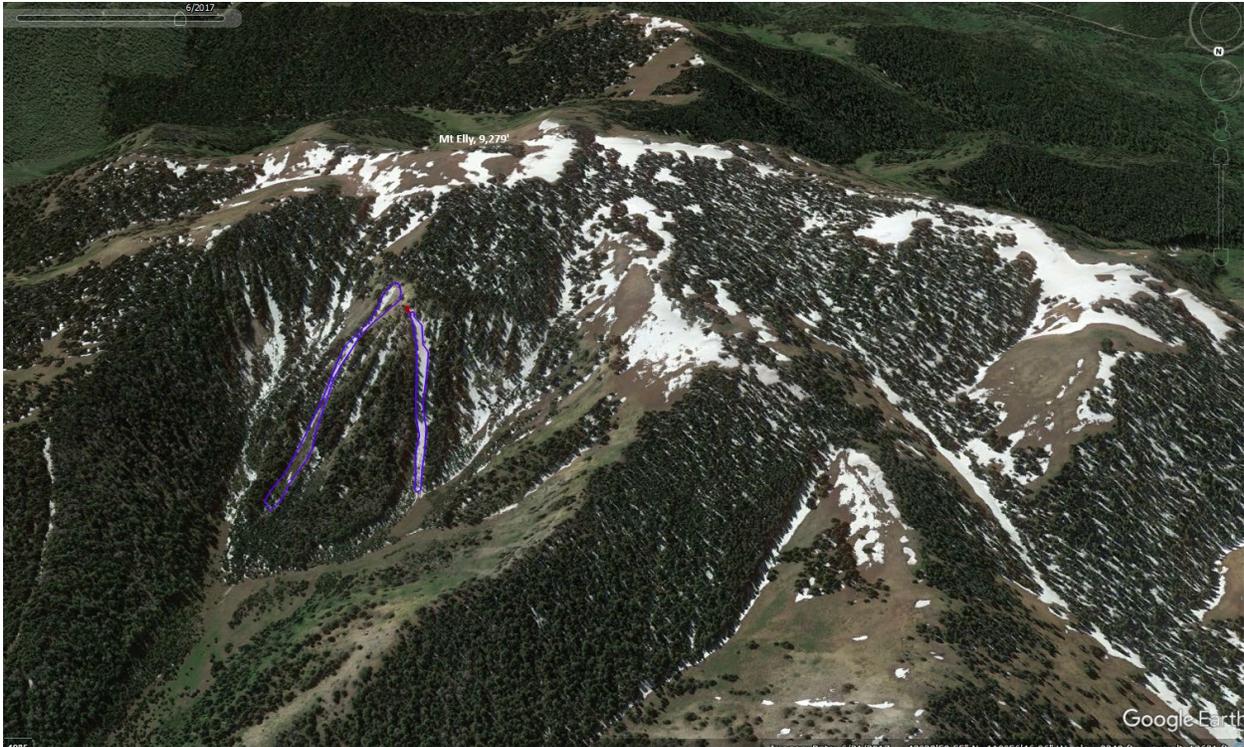


Figure 3 Aerial photo taken in 2017 highlighting the chutes.

The sheriff's deputy on scene recounted that these were very experienced skiers. The pair had skied another objective at the Pass with others in the morning before moving on to the Claw (Figure 3 and 4). On the way into the steep section, the pair triggered a "small slab" avalanche on the skier's right side of the ridge (Fig. 5). It was reported that the lead skier was not comfortable skiing that slope after the slide. The lead skier then skied around the steep ridge to descend the other aspect.

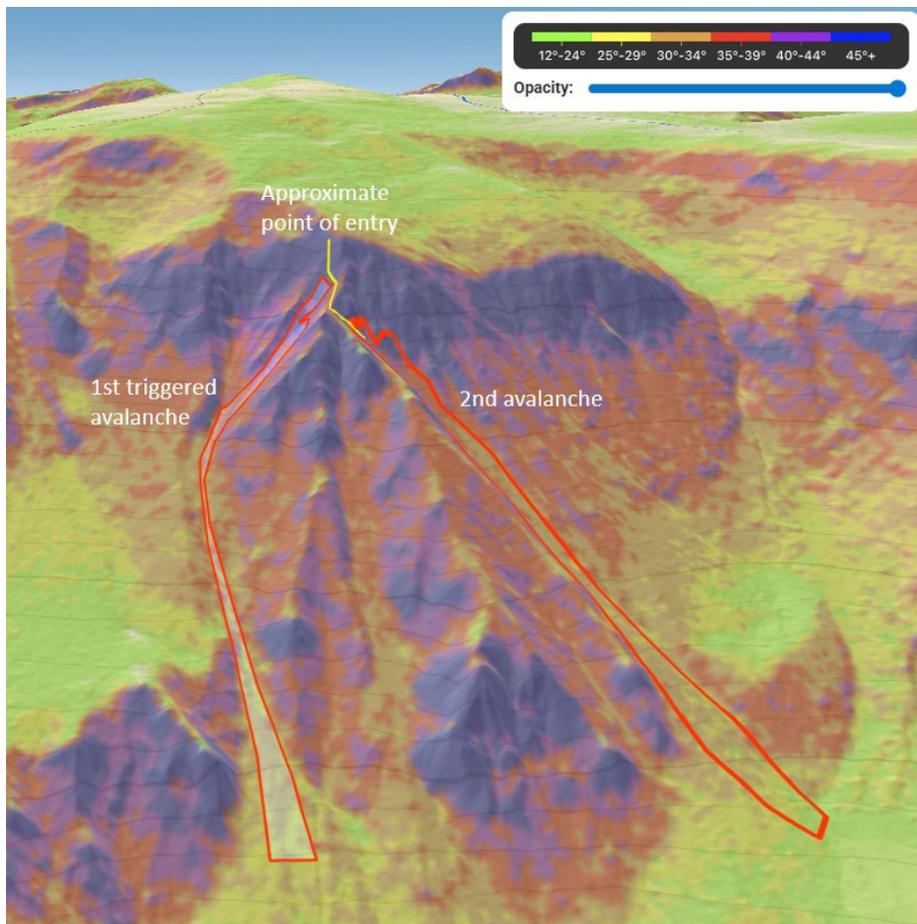


Figure 4 Slope angle shading indicates the steepness of the terrain

The lead skier made a ski cut to test the slope which did not produce an avalanche. The second skier watched from the trees as the lead skier made “one or two turns” when the slab released above him (Figs. 6 & 7). The second skier reported that the slide carried his partner approximately 300 yards through the treed path below, a distance which would be most of the length of the avalanche path. The second skier skied down, searching with his beacon while calling a personal contact to have them call 911. Skier 2 quickly acquired a beacon signal and then dug down to his partner who was fully buried two to three feet down against a tree. Upon exposing his head and torso and finding no pulse, the partner immediately initiated CPR prior to fully freeing his legs from the snow. The partner noted significant signs of trauma. At some point, another skier arrived on the scene to assist. At 2:31pm, the second skier called 911 directly, a call which conveyed coordinates to Teton County Search and Rescue. The local SAR helicopter and short haul team, which included an emergency room physician and nurse left the hangar 12 miles away and located the patient at 3:06pm. The responding team rendered medical aid until 4:01pm when the patient was transferred to an ambulance at Teton Pass. The patient was taken to the local hospital and later flown to a larger regional medical center where he died six days later of multi-systems trauma sustained in the avalanche.



Figure 5 The skiers cut across the top of the feature south of the ridge before entering the top of the chute that avalanched.



Figure 6 Crown lines are highlighted in red.

Analysis

This avalanche and subsequent rescue occurred late in the day. Forecast staff did not access the site due to impending darkness and avalanche risk though a good vantage point allowed viewing the site with binoculars. Another storm the following morning prevented further access.

The following points are offered to avert similar tragedies. Some points contain some element of speculation since no first-hand witness accounts were available. Hopefully, these points aren't taken as criticism of those involved, but rather as reminders to help us all avoid similar accidents.

- One of the key events in this incident is the avalanche that was triggered just prior to the fateful one. Conventional wisdom suggests that if you find one avalanche, you'll find more. The power of moving snow in a dry snow avalanche at this slope angle cannot be understated. Speeds of up to 70 mph in moving dry snow avalanche debris would make contact with trees or rocks in terrain like this devastating. A more conservative choice would be to ski the bed surface of the first avalanche or even turn around rather than risk exposure to another avalanche path.
- Ski cutting involves skiing quickly across a slope, ideally across the starting zone, to an island of safety which will not be involved in moving debris if the slope fails. Ski cutting is an advanced and potentially dangerous technique depending on snow and terrain characteristics. A stubborn slab or simply not hitting the trigger point during the ski cut can give a false sense of slope stability. In this case, the slab was just strong enough to allow the skier to become more exposed to the slab above him as he began to make turns downslope. Even when ski cutting is performed on familiar slopes and start zones with definitive islands of safety, skiers and riders can be caught and carried due to minor errors. A ski cut can reduce risk but it should be acknowledged that the cut creates only one data point on a slope and never guarantees slope stability.
- Calling for help right away, as was done here, is good practice assuming it can be done without a delay to companion rescue and exposing the victim's airway. Every backcountry traveler should work out rescue details like these through pre-planning and regular practice. Calling 911 seems to be occasionally misrepresented as wasting valuable time during the emergent phase of a rescue but the coordinates obtained during a 911 call are critical. Remember that any burial is a medical emergency worthy of assessment. In this case, even extraordinary efforts in the field couldn't reverse the effects of the traumatic injuries.



Figure 7 Another viewpoint of the top of the slope. The yellow line is the approximate route of the first skier into the chute.