



Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie
National Forest

Forest FEATURES

Skiing, learning and sharing

Ski patrol brings awareness and aid to winter recreationists



Cascade Backcountry Ski Patrol Instructor Dick Willy skis to the next learning station of the mountain travel and rescue outdoor course near Stevens Pass.

Every winter for 35 years teams of Cascade Backcountry Ski Patrollers volunteer their weekends on the Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest at Stevens or Snoqualmie Pass areas patrolling wilderness trails. Their goal: to keep people safe.

In the winter on the Cascades any little incident can turn into an extreme situation.

This past winter the ski patrol helped recover a backcountry skier from Snoqualmie Pass. The accident happened near the Red Mountain area in a location

without a trail and lots of vertical climb. "It shouldn't have happened. She was an experienced skier and familiar with winter hazards," said Dick Willy, the ski instructor and 18-year veteran of the ski patrol. "Being professionals we forget to heed the warning signs and tend to think we can handle any situation," he said. According to Willy, the skier violated two rules: never go out alone and never step out onto a cornice. Mountain peaks can build up a lip of snow which is not solid and could release. "You don't always know where the peak is, people need to be aware of winter conditions," he said.



But Willy stressed that new technology also introduces a serious threat to inexperienced recreationists: encouraging them to go into the backcountry without the skills needed for the dangers in the wilderness.

The ski patrol provides aid and assistance to skiers, snowboarders and snowshoers according to John Robinson, forestry technician in Skykomish Ranger District, “They keep them aware of any avalanche dangers, weather conditions and advise them on proper trail etiquette. They set the example for all trail users,” he said.

The 51 volunteer backcountry ski patrol members work November to April, 10 to 20 hours each weekend, donating over 5,000 hours each season. Many are accomplished mountaineers. Some use alpine, nordic or telemark skis; others operate split snowboards. Many members volunteer for other alpine patrols at White, Hyak, Stevens Pass or work on the Ski Patrol Rescue Team assisting King County in search and rescue operations.

Teams go out carrying 30-40 pound packs full of emergency gear and supplies: first aid kit, emergency shelter, extra food and water, clothing, shovel, probe, rope, avalanche beacon and a radio. “I come across people on the trails with limited packs,” said Bill Brockway, Stevens Pass coordinator for the ski patrol. “I have enough gear to survive and can keep someone else alive for a night,” he said.

The ski patrol encounters all types and abilities of skiers with different experience levels and gear. “I was once asked about a guide book map out on the trail,” said Willy, “That is like using a back-of-the-hand drawing.

Spending the night in the backcountry is part of the job for the ski patrol.



Ski patrol candidates Jim Evans and Mike O’Neal practice their orienteering training by sighting on waypoint locations.

Ski patrol candidates Scott Waller, Heidi Bartos, John Cary and Jen Savonen hoist an injured skier in a flager flyer, a makeshift sled, while the patrol instructor Mitch Winter observes.



You need a good topographical map of the area you are heading into,” he said.

On an average day a ski patrol team may encounter four to five people on the trail. Most users just need information and to be aware of any potential dangers. Search and rescues are handled by the county activated by calling 911.

A group of cross country skiers and the Forest Service started the Cascades Backcountry Ski Patrol in 1976 because they were concerned with the growth of winter backcountry recreation users with little or no experience. Patrols began in the Skykomish Ranger District and later expanded into the Snoqualmie Ranger District in 1984.

Last weekend, the Cascade Backcountry Ski Patrol met their mandatory candidate training requirements in winter weather, survival, navigation and rescue up at Stevens Pass. Annually they take two level 1 classes in avalanche awareness, evaluation and rescue, and mountain travel and rescue. Each class includes eight hours of classroom

lecture and a field exercise to refine what they’ve learned and work together as a team.

The Cascade Backcountry Ski Patrol is certified by the National Ski Patrol, giving members training opportunities such as working with the alpine patrols, toboggan handling, advanced first aid, instructor training and leadership development.

“This is a volunteer service, you need to have a desire to help and a love for skiing,” said Willy.

Learn more about the Cascade Backcountry Ski Patrol at <http://www.cascadebackcountryskipatrol.org/CBSP/Home.html>.

*Story and photos by Kelly Sprute
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