

Brian Mulvehill, 02-08-06

Slide kills man

NEAR FLATTOP: Snow buries snowshoer a mile from parking lot.

By MEGAN HOLLAND Anchorage Daily News

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A snowshoer was killed Wednesday night when an avalanche swept down from the slopes of a gully beside Flattop Mountain, authorities said.

Authorities said the snowshoer was buried in an area popularly known as Boy Scout Gully, which for years has been a concern of Chugach State Park rangers because of its easy accessibility and the boom in popularity of backcountry snowboarding and skiing. The region is one of the most popular recreational areas, both in the winter and in the summer, in the Anchorage vicinity.

Anchorage city manager Denis LeBlanc, who was on the scene Wednesday night, said searchers began a massive effort that ultimately involved the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, the Nordic Ski Patrol, the Anchorage Fire Department and the Alaska State Troopers after a snowshoer reported about 7:30 p.m. that a friend had been swept away by the sliding snow and was missing.

Searchers probed the snow and brought in dogs to help. They reported about 9:30 p.m. that one of the dogs had located the body of the missing man.

"You know, life is so fragile," LeBlanc said. "It's a beautiful night tonight. And Alaskans were out doing what Alaskans love to do. It's just a tragedy."

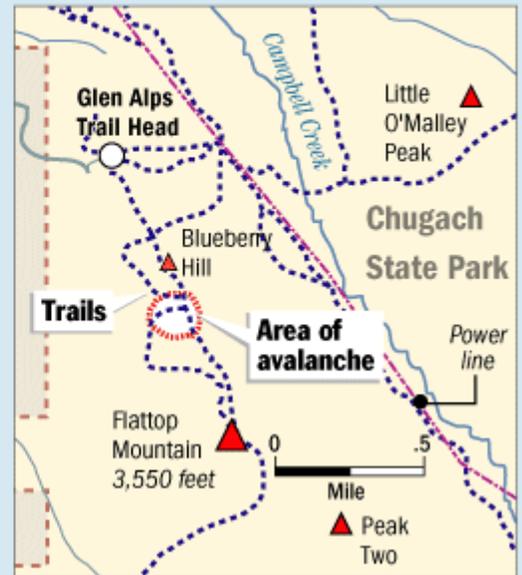
Authorities on the scene said one of the snowshoers somehow triggered the slide.

Deadly slopes

Powerline Pass from the Glenn Alps Trail Head is a popular recreation area for Anchorage residents. The area's convenience does not lessen its danger. Many slopes in exhibit potential for avalanche activity. Wednesday evening's is the latest in a history of Flattop Mountain area fatality accidents.



Powerline Pass below Flattop Mountain



Previous avalanche accidents in Chugach State Park near Flattop

Date	Location	Activity	Number involved	Result
Dec. 30, 1973	Flattop Mountain	Climbers	10	1 Injury, 1 killed
Jan. 1, 1974	Tanaina Peak	Climbers	2	1 killed
Dec. 30, 1990	Powerline Pass	Snowmachine	1	1 killed
Nov. 9, 1992	Flattop Mountain	Skiing	2	2 killed
Mar. 27, 1994	Powerline Pass	Snowmachine	1	1 killed
Dec. 24, 1994	Middle Fork	Skiing	1	1 killed
Feb. 8, 2006	Flattop Mountain	Snowshoer	1	1 killed

Survival depends on time

Research on buried skiers points to how crucial time is for survival. Many times the decision to go for help results in a fatal delay in finding victims. Before you enter snow country, make sure everyone in your group knows how to search for someone buried in an avalanche.

Approximate rate of survival by elapsed time of rescue.

85%	40%	20%
at	at	at
15	30	60
minutes	minutes	minutes

Safety equipment

Safety equipment on-hand is probably the single most important preparation people can do to ensure survival if someone is caught in an avalanche. Some essential items are avalanche beacons on each person, along with probes, shovels and even a personal breathing device can increase chances of survival.

Triggering an avalanche

Vibrations shake the snow loose



Weight overloads snowpack



Temperature and weather changes cause instability



Source: ADN research, Knight Ridder Tribune

CHARLES ATKINS / Anchorage Daily News

The dead man, whose body was flown off the range in a helicopter, had not been identified late Wednesday night.

The avalanche occurred within a mile of the Glen Alps parking lot. "It just goes to show you the mess you can get into right out of the parking lot," said William Laxson with the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group and who was involved in the search effort.

Soren Orley, also with the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, said it appeared the two snowshoers were en route back to the Glen Alps parking lot and were about 100 feet apart when the avalanche occurred. He said high winds of recent days had loaded the slopes of the gully, which is between Blueberry Hill and Flattop, with snow.

"It was an area that frequently avalanches," said Bill Romberg of Alaska Mountain Rescue Group. "It's not a spot to mess with."

Romberg said the slide appeared to be about 200 yards wide. He said the snowshoers carried no rescue gear with them -- no avalanche beacons, no shovels, no probes.

Authorities said the two were the only ones who appeared to be in the area when the avalanche occurred.

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Victims triggered fatal slide

FLATTOP: Brian Mulvehill died crossing unstable avalanche chute.

By CRAIG MEDRED and MEGAN HOLLAND
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The night was beautiful with twinkling stars and a near-full moon when 32-year-old Brian Mulvehill took his last steps on Flattop Mountain above Anchorage.

Snowshoeing down toward Blueberry Hill with friend John Lorentzen on Wednesday night, the transplant from Michigan avoided patches of wind-scoured rock in favor of a route across a smooth patch of snow. It was a decision that cost him his life.

Hurricane-force winds and blowing snow had by Thursday prevented a complete investigation of what happened in the gully between Blueberry Hill and the top of Alaska's most-climbed peak, but rescuers who were on the scene the night before painted a picture of a seemingly attractive route that turned out to be deadly.

"It was a setup," said Paul Brusseau with Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs. It was Brusseau's dog who found Mulvehill's body Wednesday night.

Mulvehill stepped into a patch of snow that was just waiting for something or someone to trigger a slide, rescuers believe. He became the second man to die in an avalanche in the Anchorage area in the past five weeks. His death follows that of 30-year-old skier Joel Schihl of Anchorage, who perished in an avalanche on Raggedtop Mountain near Girdwood on Jan. 3.

Schihl was an experienced mountaineer who misjudged the stability of high-altitude snow above Girdwood. Mulvehill was a less-experienced snowshoer who appears to have stumbled into a trap left by a weekend storm.

That storm raked the Chugach Mountains with high winds and moved snow into dangerous locations, said Mike Goodwin, acting superintendent for Chugach State Park. Drifts formed atop a layer of sugary, unconsolidated fluff that retained just enough friction to hold everything in place until someone cracked the surface.

On Wednesday afternoon, after Mulvehill finished work, he did what he did every Wednesday this winter with roommates and friends: snowshoed up Flattop.

On the way down, the two men were 15 feet apart when they heard what Lorentzen described to Alaska State Troopers as a snap. The snow came apart and started sliding downhill on the force of gravity.

The two men started running, troopers said. But Mulvehill was caught up in the slide, which swept him down the slope and buried him.

Lorentzen escaped the full force of the slide.

Two hours later, after a massive search effort was under way, Brusseau's dog found Mulvehill under 3 1/2 to 4 feet of snow in the gully.

"It was a soft slab (slide)," Brusseau said. "There were big chunks, but fairly soft."

"It was right in there in what we call the tunnel," Brusseau said. "It usually slides a couple times a year. It just kind of slumps on down."

Mulvehill, an electrician who moved to Alaska two years ago, first to Mat-Su then to Anchorage, was described by friends and family as an avid outdoorsman who loved to fish, hunt and hike -- he had only been snowshoeing recently though. He was just settling into life in Anchorage and was about to buy a condominium, said Larry Clock, an uncle in Michigan.

Mulvehill is believed to be the first to die in the tunnel, but others have been caught by sliding snow and partially buried there in the past. And a number of nearby slopes are notorious for their avalanche danger.

Just to the south in a gully between Peak Two and Peak Three, experienced mountaineers Bruce Hickok and Mike Radovan died when caught by an avalanche while skiing in 1992. Just to the east, Anchorage newspaper publisher Nick Coltman was left paralyzed after being caught in an avalanche and tumbling down the slope in 2000.

Because the Glen Alps entrance to Chugach Park is so close to Anchorage and so popular, Goodwin said, people tend to overlook the dangers that lurk nearby. Signs at the start of the trail to Flattop clearly warn of avalanche danger.

Mulvehill and Lorentzen carried ice axes, crampons and poles but neither had avalanche probes, shovels or avalanche beacons. All three are vital if there is to be hope of finding and rescuing someone caught and buried in an avalanche, experts say.

Even more important than safety gear, however, is knowledge, said Carl Skustand of the Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center (www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach/glacier/snow.html).

He noted that the two men went hiking in the mountains just after a big storm that moved around tons of snow, leaving leeward slopes wind-loaded and just waiting for something to trigger a slide.

Where the men could have used bare, windswept ground to steer clear of avalanche danger, Brusseau added, they chose instead to charge into a snowfield.

"It's kind of frustrating," Skustad said. "People don't know the danger they're getting into. They don't really know that they're in dangerous terrain."

The Anchorage-based Alaska Avalanche School has been trying to change that with avalanche clinics around the state, as has the North America Outdoor Institute which does a "Be Snow Smart" program for Alaska junior high and high school students in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Public Safety.

But the programs have yet to reach all Alaskans and appear, at least in a handful of cases, to be somewhat counter-productive. Some skiers and snowmachine riders have used their knowledge of avalanche risks more to push the envelope of mountain adventure than to seek the safest routes for travel.

Goodwin said that now is a time when everyone should be thinking safety. The snowpack in many areas is highly unstable and is only likely to become more so because of the storm that was sweeping through the region Thursday.

Even before the Thursday storm hit, he said, snow in the Hatcher Pass area north of Palmer was so tender that state park rangers trying to put up warning signs on snowmachine trails there were themselves setting off avalanches.

South of Anchorage, Skustad said, things aren't all that much better. Girdwood and Turnagain Pass got so much snow in last weekend's storm that the weight of it brought down natural avalanches on about 60 percent of the most dangerous slopes, he said, but that still leaves a lot of terrain waiting to catch an unsuspecting skier, snowmachiner or snowboarder.

On Thursday, Skustad was anxiously waiting to see whether the new storm, which was bringing avalanches down across the Seward Highway, would make the situation for recreationists better or worse.

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