

Pandemic Pandemonium

Backcountry Recreation during the 2020/21 winter

Imagine the iconic photo of the Chilkoot Trail; miners and prospectors tip to tail climbing over a high mountain pass during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898. Now imagine that scene playing out on the Seattle Ridge uptrack or the SW ridge of Cornbisicut this winter. 122 years later, the prospectors equivalent may as well be your new-to-the backcountry mountain rider or ski tourer in search of their slice of Valhalla in an all-out effort to escape pandemic-driven cabin fever.

Based on several different metrics and anecdotal evidence, the 2020/21 winter is poised to be the equivalent of the Klondike Gold rush and if last spring/summer are any indication, the upcoming winter is likely to be the busiest in the history of our sport. Used snowmobiles are selling for a premium, demand for avalanche classes is far outpacing supply, search and rescue organizations are reporting three-fold increases in call-outs last summer and you're more likely to spot a unicorn on Turnagain Arm than you are to find a mountain sled for sale on the showroom floor. Oh, let's not forget that La Niña is currently providing us with the deepest start to winter in 30 years! So how can we prepare for the inevitable onslaught of backcountry newbies and at the same time, ensure the safety of our fellow skiers and riders this winter? I'll offer a few ideas that may just help provide an additional margin of error for novices and veterans alike.



Chilkoot trail in 1898 or the final pitch to Tincan's common bowl in 2020/21? Alamy stock photo

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1. **Be a mentor** or seek out mentorship. There's a reason this is listed first! With avalanche classes near 100% capacity and long wait lists, not everyone who wants an avalanche education will get one this winter. Lend your expertise to a new rider in Petersville. Teach someone the basics of avalanche rescue. Take a rookie splitboarding on a Manitoba tour and provide that person a positive first experience. Remember, they don't know what they don't know and if they don't go out with you, they'll go with someone else. Next thing you know the skin track is littered with orange peels!
2. Develop a **backcountry ethic** and lead by example. The need for respect, decency and compassion in the backcountry has always been a hot topic. These common values will be of the utmost importance as a new crop of users cuts their teeth in our favorite zones this winter. Be aware of adjacent groups. Provide space, communicate intentions before dropping in, clear out of runout zones and be rescue ready. Nobody wants to trigger a slide onto another party, but it's going to take good communication and a coordinated effort to ensure this doesn't happen as favored zones will be busier than ever.
With this ethic comes a responsibility to your community. If you witness or are involved in an avalanche, please communicate that info thru your local avalanche center and/ or social media, you could very well save a life!
3. **Parking lot protocol**. Develop a protocol to ensure everyone is reading from the same sheet of music prior to leaving the trailhead. This includes familiarity with the avalanche forecast, a plan for the day, transceiver check, airbag check, communications, etc. Multiple fatalities last year

were attributed to the very simple and fixable issue of skiers and snowmachiners leaving the parking lot with no avalanche transceiver or it was in the off position. Develop this protocol with your crew and follow through every time. No excuses!

4. **Be flexible.** For so many of us, the last 9 months has been an exercise in resiliency and flexibility as we navigate COVID and its social implications. Since society hasn't provided us a regular schedule, perhaps this is the winter to buck the norm and avoid the weekend crowds, or head for an entirely different zone. Easier said than done for many, but if you can find flexibility in your schedule head to Turnagain for mid-week pow turns. With online learning in full effect, Wednesdays may be a great day for some asynchronous learning opportunities for kids in a winter classroom!



*Traffic jam on Sunburst's west ridge.
Photo: Zach Liller (ANSP)*

5. **Manage your risk:** This may sound cliché, but it is more important than ever this winter to not add additional stress on search and rescue organizations and our healthcare workers during this pandemic. Recognize that your decisions recreating this winter have downstream effects if injured in the backcountry. Practice patience this winter not only with the snowpack and your fellow backcountry enthusiasts but with big objectives as crowded zones may push advanced users further afield into riskier terrain and untested regions.

A busier than normal backcountry is a certainty this winter in Alaska and across the west. With so many other unknowns swirling around the ethos, I challenge us all to focus on and effect what is within our control in this largely uncontrolled environment. If it turns out that Turnagain Pass resembles the Chilkoot Trail of 1898 this winter, well then at least we'll have some tools to provide that additional margin of safety.

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