



2020/01/18 - Colorado - Uncompahgre Gorge, south of Ouray

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Avalanche Details

- Location: Uncompahgre Gorge, south of Ouray
- State: Colorado
- Date: 2020/01/18
- Time: 10:45 AM (Estimated)
- Summary Description: 1 climber struck by falling ice, buried, and killed
- Primary Activity: Climber
- Primary Travel Mode: Foot
- Location Setting: --

Number	Avalanche	Site
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caught: 1 • Partially Buried, Non-Critical: 0 • Partially Buried, Critical: 0 • Fully Buried: 1 • Injured: 0 • Killed: 1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type: I • Trigger: N - Natural • Trigger (subcode): -- • Size - Relative to Path: R1 • Size - Destructive Force: D1 • Sliding Surface: G - At Ground/Ice/Firm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slope Aspect: SE • Site Elevation: 8800 ft • Slope Angle: -- • Slope Characteristic: --

Avalanche Comments

A large chunk of ice broke away from a supported pillar, triggering a small loose snow avalanche (-4 inches deep) on the rock slab below. The mix of broken ice and snow debris flowed over an ice-covered cliff and entrained additional loose snow on the slope below, before stopping in the creek (I-NI-R1-D1-G). The moving snow alone was not enough to injure or bury a person, but being struck by large chunks of ice and/or burial in the terrain trap below produced a fatal outcome.

Backcountry Avalanche Forecast

The Colorado Avalanche Information Center (CAIC)'s Backcountry Avalanche Forecast for the North San Juan zone rated the avalanche danger as Moderate (Level 2) at all elevations. The forecast listed Persistent Slab avalanches as the primary problem on east, southeast, and south aspects near and above treeline. The likelihood of triggering was possible and potential size large. Wind Slab avalanches were listed as the secondary problem on north, northeast, east, southeast, and south aspects at all elevations. The likelihood of triggering was possible and potential size small to large. The North San Juan Summary on January 18 read:

Friday's storm added a nice refresh but also drifted snow into sensitive drifts. You can trigger avalanches where the wind created dense drifts 1 to 2 feet deep below ridges and cross-loaded terrain features. You are most likely to find these drifts on north to east through south-facing slopes. A slide in the new snow may step down to deeper buried weak layers creating a larger more-dangerous avalanche especially on southeast-facing slopes where we've seen avalanches involving fragile crusts during each of our last few storms.

Cracking and collapsing in the new snow are signs of unstable snow. Avoid smooth, rounded, pillow-looking drifts. Wind sheltered slopes less steep than 35 degrees offer safer riding conditions.

Weather Summary

January 18 dawned clear and cold after a two-day storm ended the night before. The CAIC maintains a snow study site and remote weather station at 9,543 feet in elevation approximately one mile south of the accident site. On the morning of January 18, CAIC forecasters measured 3 inches of new snow with 0.25 inches of snow water equivalent that fell in the previous 24 hours. The two-day storm total was 4 inches of snow with 0.3 inches of snow water equivalent. The weather station recorded a low temperature of 0F at 4:00 AM. Temperatures rose to 10F at 10:00 AM and to 18F by 11:00 AM. Mostly sunny skies persisted throughout the morning.

Snowpack Summary

Many slopes in the Uncompahgre Gorge are quite steep and snow often sheds off of the terrain rather than accumulate into a deep snowpack. The snow cover is generally thin and patchy with the most snow on small benches and lower-angle terrain features in the gorge. At the accident site the snowpack ranged from 2 to 18 inches deep. The snow was soft (Fist to Four Fingers on the Hand Hardness Index) and consisted primarily of faceted snow grains without distinct layers.

Events Leading to the Avalanche

One guide and three clients left Ouray at 7:45 AM to go ice climbing. Their plan was to climb a route called The Dungeon in the nearby Uncompahgre Gorge. The party arrived at the parking area near mile marker 89 on US Highway 550 by 8:10 AM. They descended snowy slopes to the creek bottom, crossed, and ascended to the base of the climb. They began climbing by 9:30 AM. The guide led the route and set up a top rope so the clients could take turns climbing.

Climber 1 was the coldest and climbed the route first, followed by Climber 2. While Climber 3 was taking her turn on the route, Climber 1 moved slightly to the north of the route to take pictures. Climber 2 waited just south of the Guide, who was belaying from under the main route. Climbers 1 and 2 were untethered.

Accident Summary

The group heard a loud "crack", and suddenly ice and snow rained down upon them. Several chunks of ice hit Climber 3, though she was uninjured. When the air cleared, the group saw that the snow and ice had obviously hit and buried Climber 1.

The Guide immediately lowered Climber 3. Climber 3 called 911 to report the accident and request assistance. The Guide and Climber 2 began searching for Climber 1, digging through the debris with their hands. They could not find evidence of Climber 1, and believed she was buried in Red Mountain Creek. They were unable to search the creek bottom due to the fragile snow and ice bridge in the gorge and the fast-flowing water underneath.

After the initial search, the Guide ascended back to the party's packs. She sent an SOS via InReach and made additional phone calls to notify authorities of their exact position and situation. Cellular phones did not work near the creek, but the group had patchy service at the belay ledge.

Rescue Summary

At 11:03 AM Ouray Mountain Rescue (OMR) was dispatched with the report of an avalanche in a small gully with one climber buried. OMR arrived at the parking lot at 11:38 AM. The team descended into the gorge. They immediately began probing and initially got several false positive strikes.

A member of the rescue team broke through the bridge of snow and ice debris revealing the flowing water of the creek underneath. OMR fixed a safety line between trees on either side of the creek. Two rescuers clipped into the safety line and continued spot probing. At 12:23 PM a team member found Climber 1 with a probe strike.

The avalanche buried Climber 1 head down in the creek bed, under approximately five feet of ice and snow. OMR moved several large chunks of ice to reach Climber 1. They removed Climber 1 from the debris and creek at 12:36 PM. A paramedic began resuscitation efforts, but they were unsuccessful.