

## Know Before You Go: Avalanche Safety

Montana is having an active avalanche season which means outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy snowmobiling, skiing, and snowshoeing in back country areas need to be well informed before heading out to enjoy winter.

News of an avalanche north of Cooke City causing the death of a snowmobiler on New Year's Eve may have Montanans concerned that we are experiencing above normal risk levels for avalanches this year. According to Doug Chabot, Director of Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center (GNFAC), what is different about this year is the 120% above normal snowfall on top of a weak snowpack base. Chabot stated, "The early season snow we had sets a long time, and we get a weak, sugar-like foundation for the rest of winter."

As snow hits the ground, it changes due to temperature, humidity, wind, and other conditions. New snow during and immediately after the act of "loading" present the most unstable conditions, making steep areas unpredictable. Chabot advises that it is important to always check conditions before exploring back country areas with terrain at or greater than 30-degree grades.

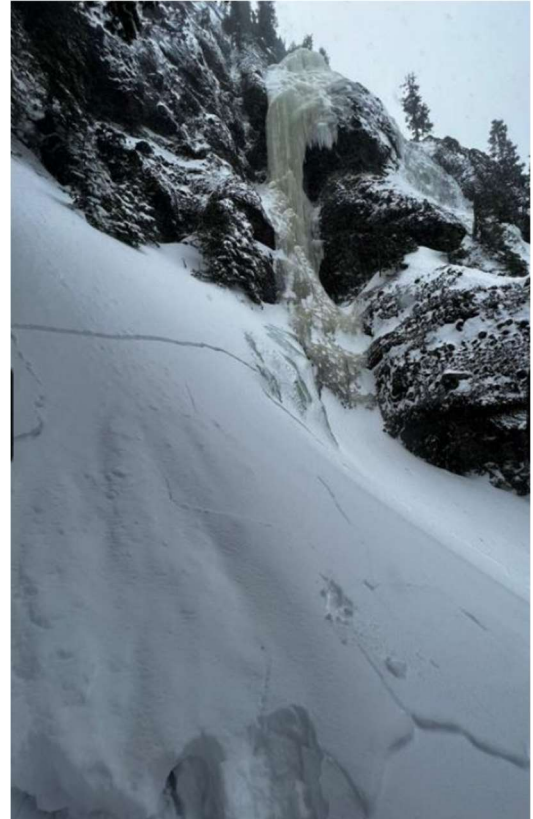
## Mitigating Avalanche Danger

While recreational areas and many county and state agencies work to mitigate avalanche dangers and protect roads, towns, and ski areas, going into back country areas is different. Avalanche centers like GNFAC warn and inform with the goal of educating outdoor enthusiasts so they can both prepare for and avoid dangerous situations.

## Preparing for Back Country Recreation

Director Chabot says the number one thing people can do to prepare for avalanche risks is to take a class with a field-based component. The website [Avalanche.org](http://Avalanche.org) is a national site with a directory to several Montana Avalanche centers, all of which offer classes.

In addition to taking a class, Chabot recommends going online and using interactive maps to check conditions. "Be aware of recent activity which is the number one sign that slopes are unstable." Finally, Chabot adds, always do the following three things:



Large Cracks near Ice Climb in Hyalite. Photo courtesy of Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center (GNFAC).

- Go with a partner.
- Carry a foundational gear kit with an avalanche transceiver, metal shovel, and a probe pole.
- Only allow one person at a time to enter avalanche risk areas so that if an avalanche happens, one partner can call for help and better assist in locating the other.

Whether you work, play, or travel in avalanche areas, it's important to be informed and prepared before you go. Check your region for the nearest avalanche center to learn more about classes, current conditions, and recent activity.