

Sidecountry Rescue-Who Is Responsible?

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With more and more ski areas opening their boundaries and commercial and personal videos glamorizing steep descents in untracked powder, an increasing number of skiers and snowboarders are accessing "sidecountry terrain", i.e., off-area, lift-accessible terrain adjacent to ski areas. Consequently, we can expect the number of incidents requiring rescue to increase as well.

But who should respond to sidecountry rescues? Help must arrive swiftly in the case of life-threatening, time-critical accidents such as an avalanche burial, tree strike, or other major trauma. Off-area rescue is usually the responsibility of the county sheriff, but his staff is typically unpracticed in over-the-snow travel. Local search-and-rescue (SAR) units have the necessary skills and training, but may require an hour or so to organize and get to the trailhead. Ski patrollers can often get to an incident site most quickly, but patrollers are resort employees dedicated to on-area safety.

This paper describes a first-hand experience with an open-boundary accident and debates what organization should proactively prepare for sidecountry rescue with a plan, SAR equipment, and special training.