

Snowsports fans in B.C learn tough lessons from the Revelstoke tragedy

Avalanche Safety Experts offer Emergency Training in the North Shore Mountains this weekend

Vancouver, B.C. – “The tragedy will haunt us for the rest of our lives but it won’t keep me out of the back country.” These are the words of John Seibert, who survived the avalanche that claimed the lives of 7 people near Revelstoke one year ago. Considering the explosion in popularity of snow sports over the past decade, this attitude comes as no surprise. With easier access to the mountains, more people are heading out into the backcountry in search of the best powder and are thereby putting themselves in increasing danger. This Saturday, a group of snowshoers are heading off into North Shore Mountains to learn from the experts how to reduce the chances of getting caught out by an avalanche.

Deadly Conditions

“Almost half of all buried avalanche victims will die within approximately 30 minutes, so quick action using proper equipment is vital in order to save lives,” said Catherine D’Aoust who is organizing the Avalanche Awareness course on Saturday. Catherine of GAIA Adventures and Avalanche Awareness expert, Marlene Ford are taking a group of snowshoers up Cypress Mountain to learn more about the conditions that can provoke an avalanche. Catherine says, “Wind is the most common cause of avalanches but rapid warming or melting snow can also be a cause. Rain on new snow almost always results in avalanches.” Mountain-users in B.C. are said to be particularly at risk considering the effect of the heavy snowfall with moderate to strong winds and possibility of rain on the region’s slopes this winter.

Crucial Preparation

According to Avalanche experts, preparation and thorough training before you head out into the mountains are the key to safety. Avalanches are caused when the weight of new or wind blown snow overloads the strength of a less stable, buried layer which can fracture, causing a slab to work loose and slide down the mountain. Catherine D’Aoust says that an Introductory Avalanche Safety Course can train people in the key skills, “People learn how to assess an avalanche hazard by digging a snow pit to determine the strength and bonding between the layers of snow. This is crucial knowledge that could mean the difference between life and death out in the backcountry.”

There are lessons that may be learned from the past avalanches. In addition to being trained and well-equipped with transceivers, shovels and probes, backcountry travellers must have a clear understanding of how best to travel in high-risk areas. Any terrain with 25 to 45 degrees of slope represents the greatest hazard. Most avalanches occur under these conditions. This was also true in the case of Durrand Glacier where skiers traversed a 35 to 40 degrees slope when disaster struck in January, 2003. What if the second group had been at the same elevation (2,300 meters) as the first group? It seems reasonable to suppose that the first group may have caused the avalanche to initiate, engulfing the second group traversing below.

Future winter adventurers must take heart and follow a more prudent approach when crossing a gully that may have unstable snow and take the following action:

- Have party spread out
- One person at a time crosses
- Transceiver should be on and set to transmit
- Do up loose clothing and undo pack belt
- Take hands out of ski pole straps

One thing is for certain adventurers will continue to follow their passion in the outdoors. We must learn from every accident, every training opportunity and be safe.

BACKGROUND

About Catherine D'Aoust

Catherine worked as an aeronautical engineer for Transport Canada until 1997. She then became a Certified Personal Fitness Trainer and set up GAIA Adventures to empower women to achieve healthy lives and encourage their participation in outdoor recreation. Her adventure programs include Hiking, Rock Climbing, Cross Country Skiing, Snow Shoeing, Kayaking, Group Running and Trail Running, Orienteering, Team Building and Access Your Power workshops.

Introduction to Avalanche Safety for Snowshoers - January 24, 2004

The course focuses on both theory and practise using Cypress Mountain trails. It is open to both men and women and lasts from 8am until around 5pm. The cost is \$85+GST which includes lunch, guide, transportation, transceivers and shovels. Snowshoe rentals are extra. For more information please contact Catherine D'Aoust (see below for contact details).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND INTERVIEWS:

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