





#WORTHIT?

When search and rescue team members Hunter Mortensen and Ben Butler responded to a call on a popular Summit County couloir, they were surprised to find the stranded men on snowblades. While the pair quickly acknowledged their misjudgment and thanked the men, the incident speaks to a greater trend: Increased backcountry users, and their subsequent rescue needs, are putting a strain on volunteer teams.

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Late in the afternoon on Jan. 3, 2021, Hunter Mortensen and Ben Butler peered over a cliff at 10,400 feet. The winter light was fading. Veteran members of the Summit County Rescue Group (SCRG), one of the busiest volunteer search-and-rescue (SAR) teams in America, they were responding to a request for help. A couple of hours earlier, two local skiers in their 20s had called 911 to report they were stuck on the north face of Mt. Royal, where they'd been trying to descend a technical backcountry run known as the Coin Slot. The line starts with a mandatory rappel into a narrow cleft, feeding a steep, sparsely treed apron that plummets toward Interstate 70. Though it has become more popular in recent years, it carries ample objective hazards, including avalanche danger.

So far, the winter had been dry, shallow and sketchy—already four people had died in avalanches in Colorado. The weak snowpack put Mortensen, the ski patrol director at Breckenridge and a longtime avalanche technician, on edge. >>

Responding to the call, Mortensen and Butler rappelled down to the men, who were tucked in a rocky nook, cold and frightened. They explained that after pulling their rope, the initial skier dropped in and immediately felt a large collapse in the snow. They froze. Realizing they could not climb out on their own, they called for help.

One of the first things Mortensen noticed upon reaching the men was their unusual mode of travel: snowblades—tiny skis that range in size from 75 to 140 centimeters. That’s when their objective was revealed. The pair was trying to make the first snowblade descent of the Coin Slot. Mortensen, a 17-year veteran of SCRG, wondered for a moment if he was being pranked.

He and Butler gave the duo, now clipped into a fixed line, a primer on how to ascend using friction knots. While the men climbed up and out, Mortensen lowered himself into the chute and dug a pit on the 38-degree pitch. The snowpack was just 26 inches deep. Extended column tests produced easy failures. “Very poor” stability, he wrote.

Once all four were out of the slot, they joined four SCRG members who had been staged on a ridge. The group hiked down the mountain’s front side to Frisco, Colorado, in the dark. Mostly because it didn’t involve an avalanche, the incident remained out of public eye—and discussion. Yet it spoke to several recent trends that are challenging SAR teams in the mountains.

In recent years, veteran rescuers have observed a decline in levels of preparedness, while expectations of fast, sometimes unrealistic aid have increased. The allure of novel achievements—like first snowblade descents or more technical variations of traditional lines—could be playing a larger role in people getting into trouble, at least anecdotally. All those things are happening as some teams, primarily those closer to urban areas, have seen their mission numbers skyrocket to a point where they are questioning whether an all-volunteer system will remain viable.

In Summit County, Colorado, rescue calls grew from 144 in 2019 to 217 in 2021, an all-time high. In 2022, based on numbers as of early November, calls were likely to decrease “for the first time in quite a few years,” SCRG public information officer Anna DeBattiste says. “Which is good, since the pace was heading toward being unsustainable.”

In Jackson, Wyoming, Teton County SAR set a record in 2021, fielding 106 calls. By late October 2022, the team was already at 119. “We’ve been seeing more people who are not prepared,” says Teton County SAR coordinator Mike Estes, who’s volunteered for the team for 28 years. It has become more common to have multiple groups lined up at the top of mandatory-rappel descents like the foreboding Apocalypse Couloir or stacked inside the runs themselves, a recipe that has resulted in recent rescue calls. >>





when it feels futile. Butler, SCRG's president, is an adjunct instructor at Colorado Mountain College who teaches courses on ice climbing, alpine rescue and emergency medicine. "I try to provide students with the knowledge and skills to be successful at these riskier activities, but also to recognize when self-rescue just isn't feasible," he says.

That can be a blurred line, depending on the individual and setting. "One of our senior members says that we are sometimes a 'headlamp delivery service,'" says Jim Kuthy, a retired psychologist and longtime member of the El Dorado County Search and Rescue Tahoe Team in California. "People seem to be calling more quickly and expect a higher level of assistance than most volunteer teams can offer," he says, for instance, requesting a helicopter rescue because someone is too tired to continue hiking. "Not everyone is like that, but it's become more common."

Repeatedly responding to such requests can take a toll on rescuers and

In Colorado's Indian Peaks Wilderness last summer, a 20-something couple became stranded in technical, alpine terrain after leaving the trail, then hurled insults at the rescuers staged near them overnight as everyone waited for a helicopter because the pair's location was too risky to access by foot or rope. "F--k you! Bring us a real rescue team!" one of the patients shouted. After a Black Hawk operated by the Army National Guard's Colorado Hoist Rescue Team picked them off the mountain the next morning, the male patient posted a heavily filtered photo on social media with the tags: #helicopterride #worthit.

"It's pretty hard to counter TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, all these multibillion-dollar platforms that touch everybody in the universe," says Alison Sheets, president of the Mountain Rescue Association, which represents more than 90 government-authorized teams around the country. Sheets is also the medical director of Rocky Mountain Rescue Group in Boulder County, Colorado, and plucked the couple from the Indian Peaks ledge. "There's more power and allure in doing these things than being the good Boy Scout carrying the 10 essentials and turning around without getting the picture you wanted, which is the traditional mountaineering ethic. And how do you fix that?"

Teams continue to focus on education and preparedness, even

lead to what one volunteer called "rescuer disillusionment," which further threatens the system. When Mortensen, who is also the mayor of Frisco, was signing Covid ordinances to close businesses and instructing residents to stay home, he was simultaneously being called to respond to tweaked knees among large groups of back-country skiers. "The Covid era was the first time I've felt personally insulted for being a volunteer rescuer," he says. "I think I've gotten over that, but there have been calls over the past three years where I know I'm not the right person to go into the field—whether it's contempt for the people calling or frustration that we're doing it in the same place again. Our team prides ourselves on being physically capable of doing anything, but if you're not in a mental place to do it, that can put your teammates at risk."

Back on Mt. Royal, the snowbladers apologized and acknowledged the ways in which their decisions had led them astray. Their contrite response left the rescuers feeling heartened, if not enamored with the men's objective. "They realized that what they were doing wasn't worth what they thought they were going to achieve," Mortensen says. "The nice part was they were extremely appreciative, and the important part was they made the right call in staying put."

No matter how the frequency and nature of SAR calls evolve, that remains all a rescuer can hope for. ❄️