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AVALANCHE DANGER AHEAD

Some concern joins the excitement over new Schlasman chairlift at Bridger Bowl



ERIK PETERSEN/CHRONICLE

Skiers and snowboarders traverse the Bridger Ridge in February. With a new lift at Bridger Bowl going online, avalanche experts are worried that easier access to slopes high in the mountains could mean more skiers getting into trouble in the backcountry.

By DANIEL PERSON
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As ski season ramps up in Gallatin County and avalanche experts are worried that easier access to National Forest slopes high in the mountains could mean more skiers getting in trouble in the backcountry.

The new lift, the Schlasman chairlift, should start running next week, and will take skiers and snowboarders nearly to crest of Bridger's famed ridge.

While people have been hiking to that territory for decades, avalanche experts say a lift to the ridge, plus more liberal rules concerning backcountry access from Bridger, could lure

some skiers to conditions that are over their heads.

"In the last several years, there has been an open gate that has allowed skiers to travel into the backcountry. (Now), there's easier access to out-of-bounds skiing," Ron Johnson, a specialist with the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center, said Wednesday. The lift "puts you right into avalanche terrain without having to work or climb for it."

Overall, the new lift is generating positive vibes in the local ski community. It marks the first expansion of terrain at the nonprofit ski area in 30 years, and will allow adrenaline seekers to fit more white-knuckle runs into a day.

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But the regulations being put on the lift belie the fact that the easy transport to unpatrolled, uncontrolled terrain also brings some danger.

Avalanche mitigation already used on portions of the ridge within Bridger's boundaries will be used on the new in-bounds terrain opened up by the Schlasman lift, marketing director Doug Wales said.

Skiers will be required to carry avalanche beacons if they want to board the Schlasman lift, in-bounds terrain will be patrolled and canyons will be used to cause slides before skiers do.

Also, Bridger Bowl distributed a DVD about avalanche safety to all season-pass holders.

"We are going to be providing access to the ridge, and people will have the ability at Bridger to make that decision of going out of bounds," Wales said. "That was another good reason to make the lift a part of ridge management. It will be easier for people to go out of bounds."

Johnson said skiing in the backcountry adds several risks to an outing.

"All the users need to know there hasn't been any avalanche mitigation," he said. "They are traveling into the backcountry."

He said getting rescued is more difficult, as well.

"When people leave the ski area boundary and they're caught in an avalanche or injured, it's not the responsibility of the ski patrol," he said. "It's the Gallatin County Search and Rescue. It could take a while."

With that, Johnson offered these four tips for staying safe while skiing the backcountry:

- Read or listen to the daily avalanche advisory.
- Travel with a partner.
- Carry and know how to use avalanche rescue gear, which includes an avalanche rescue beacon, shovel and probe pole.
- Only travel one at a time in avalanche terrain.

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