

Five Easy Steps to Safe Backcountry Riding

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Avalanche information can sometimes be overwhelming. Without becoming a snow scientist, recreational riders can take a few simple steps to become better educated in avalanche awareness. During the summer of 2013, the International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association, Canadian Avalanche Center and USDA Forest Service National Avalanche Center collaborated to produce a simple yet effective avalanche safety messaging system for snowmobilers. The messaging system consists of five bullet points.

GET THE GEAR: Carrying an avalanche transceiver, shovel and probe is the number one rule when traveling in the backcountry. This means each rider carries this equipment on their person and not on their sled. Without avalanche rescue gear, companion rescue would be impossible. Companion rescue is the number one chance of survival if buried in an avalanche.

GET THE TRAINING: Avalanche education and awareness is the best way to avoid being caught or killed in an avalanche. The better informed a rider or riding group becomes, the safer they will be in the backcountry. Most local avalanche centers offer free or inexpensive avalanche awareness courses throughout the winter. Taking an avalanche awareness course is a must for any avid backcountry rider.

GET THE FORECAST: Reading the avalanche forecast for the area you plan to ride will help facilitate a safer riding agenda. Many avalanche centers provide daily avalanche forecasts, while others provide forecasts a few days a week. Becoming familiar with your local avalanche center and reading the local avalanche forecast will increase a rider's margin of safety in the backcountry.

GET THE PICTURE: Mother Nature often provides many clues the snowpack is unstable. Cracking and collapsing along with recent avalanche activity are bull's eye information that unstable conditions exist. If signs of instability are present, riding on or underneath steep slopes is very dangerous. If signs of instability

aren't present, digging a snowpit and assessing the snowpack structure is the only real way to know what's under your feet.

GET OUT OF HARM'S WAY: Exposing only one rider at time in avalanche terrain is essential. This means you don't ride up to help your stuck friend on steep slopes. It also means you always watch your partner from a safe location and don't group up in avalanche runout zones. If snowmobilers followed the simple rule of only exposing one rider at a time in avalanche terrain, snowmobiler fatalities would be cut in half.

Backcountry snowmobiling is an inherently dangerous sport. Taking precautionary steps to increase your safety margin is a responsible approach for every rider. Knowing and following these five points is surefire way to improve the overall safety of backcountry riders.