

## Time for beacon, probe, and shovel

Backcountry outdoor adventurers are already enjoying the recent November snow depths. In addition to having prepped skis, boots and poles,



### Outdoors

By John Unger

the other trio of gear necessities has been assembled and carried up into the mountains, too. Here I am referring to beacon, probe and shovel.

New batteries for the new season have now been inserted into avalanche transceivers. Though commonly referred to as a beacon, the term transceiver is more specific and descriptive for this electronic tool.

It not only acts as a beacon in the unlikely event that the wearer gets buried in an avalanche, but it can be quickly turned to receive the signal from the beacon of a buried friend or stranger.

The idea of finding a buried victim's signal, but not knowing exactly where to most efficiently dig to free their airway in time, is quite a disturbing thought. That is why a collapsible probe pole should be carried by each backcountry traveler, along with the beacon.

Using a probe pole, getting a direct contact onto the victim greatly speeds his or her return to the surface and to the welcome oxygenated atmosphere that is not available to them, even in the case of most of the shallow burials.

Knowing that an average person can only hold his or her breath for, perhaps, one minute, would you want to be getting dug out of the snow by a person who is using only the tail of a ski? Certainly not. A real shovel needs to be the third of these three items, in order to raise the chances of a successful rescue in the very limited time available.

Gear plus knowledge plus practice  
These days, most of the experienced snow sports enthusiasts in the backcountry are aware of the need to carry these three items on any outing in which they may travel on or under slopes greater than 25 degrees of slope angle. However, the newer cohort of younger adults coming in to the sport have often not been exposed to this concept.

The simple act of carrying the three items of beacon, probe and shovel does not, of course, act as a lucky talisman and offer protection automatically.

Here is where a great gulf exists



Deep powder in the Northern San Juans gives Heather Swallow a November workout. (Contributed photo)

### IF YOU GO

For those who don't want to have to carry such gear, the Ironton trails are a good choice. From Ouray, continue on Colorado Highway 550 uphill, and park at the Ironton sign just short of the pass. Grand Mesa's cross-country ski trails system is beautiful, well-cared for and rewarding. The few areas of avalanche danger are noted with highway signage and need to be paid full attention. Take Hwy. 92 east from Delta.

At the top of Red Mountain Pass, on both the east and the west sides of Highway 550, avalanche tools, knowledge and skills are needed. Just over Red Mountain Pass in Silverton are fun and useful courses at [www.avyschool.com](http://www.avyschool.com). They do sell out.

MountainRescueAspen also has courses, at [www.mountainrescueaspen.org](http://www.mountainrescueaspen.org). I have attended both several times and they are always beneficial, and it is fun whether or not you attend with someone you already know.

for many backcountry skiers, riders, snowshoers and snowmobilers. A beacon only is useful if the owner actually turns it on, wears it, knows how to tell if it is transmitting properly, and is accompanied by other party members who know how to turn their beacons to the "search" function, and who know how to quickly conduct an effective search.

This knowledge then needs to be used in regular practice, or else the precious minutes for a successful search can rapidly tick away. If you

enjoy backcountry winter sports, ask this simple question of all of the members of your group the next time you are locking the vehicle and about to head into the snow. "When did each of us last practice searching with our beacons?"

It is a fair question, and an important one. Unless you are traveling with friends who are professional ski patrollers or are make their livings as guides, you will probably find out that some members have not practiced at all in the past year, and the others have

practiced just once.

This is a common situation, since all of us are making the effort to go to the snowy backcountry areas because we want to ski or ride, not because we want to practice with a beacon.

Fortunately, basic beacon practice does not have to be complicated and does not have to take up more time than the 10 or 15 minutes that the group will be pausing for lunch. A useful beacon practice can also be done in a large living room or backyard, though fencing, piping and nearby electrical wires can skew the beacon's signals.

But an indoor practice can at least get people over the first hurdles of knowing if their beacons work and how to put them into search mode.

Plus, when a buddy at the trailhead asks, you can then say "I practiced last week."

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## Signal For Help

If the time should ever come that you find yourself in need of assistance in the mountains, there are several things you should know and prepare for to get the help you need.

Rescue people respond in two different ways depending on the type of emergency they are summoned for. The most common way is a ground search. This may include responders on foot, carrying medical equipment and other supplies.

Depending on the terrain and time of year, it will most likely include responders with ATVs or snowmobiles in winter. There will always be an assortment of four-wheel drive vehicles and pickup trucks.

Depending on the nature of the emergency, there may also be air support in the form of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. The helicopter is usually used in medical emergencies and for evacuation of injured people. Air support usually does not fly at night or during other times of limited visibility.

In the event you are the one needing rescued, take some time to consider your environment. What must I do for ground people hiking or driving the trails that cross the area, to see or hear me? How will the people in the aircraft see me here?

Making yourself seen and heard is the answer. Try to picture in your mind the people who are looking for you and what they see.

Find a large and flat open area close to the place where you shelter up. Avoid trees and dark shadow areas as well as cliffs and rock outcroppings. You want to select an area large and open enough that

you can easily be seen from the air or the ground.

Here we can list several signaling tools and how to use them. The more tools that you have at your disposal, the better your chances of being found. Most are not heavy or occupy much room in a pack.

Flashlight – having a flashlight with extra batteries has many uses, but is especially useful for signaling at night. You can also buy personal strobe lights. These are used by military people as a locating tool. They can be somewhat pricey but the flash they emit can be seen for miles.

Signal mirror – a mirror can be used to signal aircraft and ground searchers by redirecting flashes of sunlight. A pilot can see the flash of sunlight directed at him from the ground from several thousand feet in the air.

Fire – having a fire by day and night provides both warmth and a visual aid for searchers. Again, have the fire as large as you can safely make it.

During the day, smoke is more visible than the flames themselves. On a hot fire, throw green branches on it to make more smoke. Having a large fire in an area where one would not normally belong draws attention. If possible, three fires spaced apart are a distress signal to the air.

Whistle – yelling does not carry as far as a whistle. Yelling will also strain your voice over long periods, while a whistle requires much less energy. The universal distress code is three evenly spaced blasts on the whistle. The responders will answer with two blasts if they hear your signal. You can beat on a metal plate or large metal can if they are available. Anything loud and manmade can be considered.



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

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