



Risky Business

The lift-accessed backcountry of Saddle Peak

by Alex Marienthal, photos by Travis Andersen

Saddle Peak sits south of Bridger Bowl as a pair of equally high points on the ridgeline. The familiar eastern slope rises 3,500 feet above the highway on the way to Bridger Bowl, and provides an iconic view to those at the ski area. The peak's extraordinary gullies and faces are the siren's song to the southwest Montana powder skier.

Access to the summit is easy. A 30-minute, 500-vertical-foot walk from the top of the Schlasman's chairlift puts skiers on top of 2,000 vertical feet of perfectly pitched, and somewhat untouched, powder skiing. Despite its attraction and ease of access, on any piece of the mountain, the consequences of an avalanche, wrong turn, or fall could be fatal.

Make no mistake, Saddle Peak is the backcountry. Avalanches are *not* mitigated by patrol and there is *no* ski-patrol rescue. The southern boundary of Bridger Bowl is at the north end of the prominent cliff band that extends across the northeast aspect of Saddle. The ski-area boundary is clearly marked with large signs on the ridge, and orange pie-plates mark the boundary



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the entire way down the slope. The wide-open face directly south of the boundary, above the large cliffs, is known as the Football Field. Again, this is backcountry.

Nearly 100% of the backcountry terrain south of the ski-area boundary is exposed to some sort of avalanche or fall hazard. This means there is no “safe zone,” or an area that is *always* safe from an avalanche or deadly fall. Depending on circumstances and location, a rescue can take hours or overnight.

If you leave the boundary of the ski area, you should travel and be prepared the same as if you were on a tour to Beehive Basin or Mt. Blackmore. Beacon, shovel, probe, partner, first-aid kit, etc. Only expose one person at a time, and stop in safe areas to wait for each other. This is a major challenge on Saddle Peak, if not impossible. To know when and where it is “safe” to travel the terrain of Saddle Peak takes very close attention to snowpack, weather, and terrain, plus many years of



Cornices and wind-loading: highway to the danger zone

experience analyzing these factors, and clear group communication and management in extreme avalanche terrain.

If you leave the ski-area boundary into the backcountry, it needs to be an intentional decision to go out-of-bounds. Be prepared with the gear, check the advisory, and have the knowledge and skills to return safely. Find the advisory and local avalanche classes at mtavalanche.com.

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been many close calls, injuries, rescues of stuck persons above cliffs, and last April, a fatality. It is wrong to think of Saddle as anything other than a dynamic and dangerous backcountry objective. This winter, as the Football Field gets tracked out hours after the Schlasman's rope drops, keep that in mind and ski accordingly. 🏔️

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