



STAY ALIVE
A Look At Bridger Bowl's New Backcountry Access
by: Doug Chabot

All skiers will be happy about two new developments in the Bridger Range. First, Bridger Bowl added 311 acres of expert terrain, the first expansion in 30 years. Second, backcountry access from the ski area will be a lot easier starting in December. Skiers will be able to ski the west side of the Ridge from Northwest Passage to Z-Chute as well as Saddle Peak from the new Schlasman's chair lift. Like every local backcountry skier, I'm really excited about the open boundaries.

I'm also worried.

I'm worried because increased access means increased personal responsibility, including getting avalanche education, investing in good rescue gear, finding a solid partner, calling the avalanche advisory, and creating a flexible, safe travel plan. I've investigated all too many avalanche accidents, and time and time again I find adults generally do a poor job of being personally responsible. Adults!! Teenagers, as a whole, are even worse. They have more accidents, take bigger risks and are more likely to be influenced by peer pressure.

The boundaries of Bridger Bowl are now open. Any one---adult or teenager, at any level or lack of personal responsibility---at any time has the freedom to exit the controlled ski area into the uncontrolled, wild, potentially deadly backcountry. Like trailheads everywhere, access is free and open and does not discriminate by age or skill. You are free to recreate and free to die—it's the American way.

Adults are the role models for kids, and adults get into trouble in the backcountry. And now kids are heading into the backcountry. This is a huge concern for the Avalanche Center and Bridger Bowl. Many young adults already have avalanche gear and ski the Ridge. By crossing the boundary they are literally just a few steps away from heading into avalanche terrain. Picture this grim scenario: Mom drops off her 14 year old son at the base area. As she drives towards Bozeman he starts up Saddle Peak, a backcountry area prone to avalanching. He's a talented skier who's been on the Ridge before and

has his required avalanche transceiver, a Christmas gift worn like a badge. Unfortunately, he's clueless about backcountry avalanche danger. Since avalanches are all about timing, maybe he's fine. And maybe he's not. Maybe he gets caught in a slide and dies. Mom doesn't know about avalanche terrain or that open boundaries require serious decision making skills. She certainly didn't know her son could easily slip out of bounds into the uncontrolled backcountry and die.

"You mean 14 year olds can just head outside Bridger Bowl into dangerous terrain?" she asks. (Or should have asked.)

"Yup."

"There's no one to stop them?"

"Nope. They're on their own."

Instead of just worrying about the situation, the Avalanche Center partnered with Bridger Bowl to warn all backcountry users, especially parents and their kids, about the dangers of avalanches immediately outside the ski area. Together we made a 10-minute movie titled *Stay Alive*. The Friends of the Avalanche Center hired 16 year old Sam Lowe-Anker to film it, while Bridger Bowl made 5,000 DVDs to hand out to every season pass holder. The movie, shot by a teen for his peers and parents, is an entertaining warning on the differences and dangers between the ski area and the backcountry. It's free, and you can view it online too at (www.mtavalanche.com/videos). I strongly urge every parent of kids who ski to watch "Stay Alive" and take responsibility for setting guidelines with their kids instead of blindly letting them ride the bus, or dropping them off at the ski area with insufficient backcountry education and without any worries. PARENTS: I give the terrain outside Bridger Bowls boundaries an R rating, definitely not PG-13.

Out of bounds access at Bridger Bowl will be gained from the ridge, new lift, or backcountry gates. Every skier and boarder is required to have an avalanche transceiver in order to gain the ridge or to ride Schlasman's, and Bridger will enforce this requirement. The ski patrol also strongly recommends that everyone ski with a partner and shovel; the bare bones minimum for anyone recreating in the backcountry.

The two major backcountry areas opened by the Schlasman's lift are Truman Gulch on the west side of the range and Saddle Peak. Each poses different challenges and dangers. Dropping off the backside of Bridger Bowl leads to Truman, a drainage fed by many long, open slopes with steep, serious avalanche terrain. Touring gear is needed to climb back out since Truman Gulch leads to the creek on the opposite side of the ski area. More importantly, the snowpack on the west faces are usually thinner, weaker and in many years more unstable than the snow on the east side. It is a mistake to assume that conditions are the same throughout the range.

Saddle Peak has a different set of dangers. First, it will be possible to glide back to the new lift from the summit. No skis or touring gear required. Anytime an activity gets easier or more convenient people tend to think it's safer, but this is definitely not the case here. The entire east face of Saddle Peak is prone to avalanche. And if that's not bad enough, the slopes end in large cliffs which are deadly if you don't know where you're going or get swept off your feet and over one.

Whenever you head out of bounds use basic backcountry precautions. Travel with a partner. Carry avalanche rescue gear. Know where you're going. And know the avalanche danger. Most important, take an avalanche class. Make sure your partner takes one as well. Daily avalanche advisories and an updated education schedule can be found at www.mtavalanche.com. If you get injured or buried in a slide it's going to be up to your partner to save you since rescue is, at best, hours away.