

# NEWS<sup>2</sup>

## A day in the life of a snow ranger

---

**By Rachael Brown**

GORHAM — Conditions change hour by hour in Huntington and Tuckerman ravines on the eastern side of Mount Washington in the White Mountain National Forest. One thing that remains constant is the vigilance of the Mount Washington Avalanche Center to alert people of the dangers and educate those who venture forth on the 6-mile round trip to the floor of Tuckerman Ravine and for some who make the ascent to the steep slopes above.

The 60-year-old MWAC is staffed by Chris Joosen, lead snow ranger; Jeff Lane, snow ranger; Helon Hoffer, snow ranger/trails program manager; and Frank Carus, snow ranger/back country wilderness program manager.

The Androscoggin Ranger District of the White Mountain National Forest operates the MWAC.

"The U.S. Forest Service is the lead agency for search and rescue from Dec. 1 to May 31 in the ravines, not N.H. Fish and Game; we work with Fish and Game in the summer," said Lane while we sat inside the ranger station. The wind was clocked at 133 mph on the summit that day.

Other supporting rescue teams are Mt. Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol, AMC, Harvard Mountaineering Club, Mountain Rescue Service, Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, The Mount Washington Observatory, SOLO, New England K-9, Upper Valley Search and Rescue and Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue.

The MWAC has three safety priorities:

1. Daily avalanche advisory for forecast areas in Huntington and Tuckerman Ravines and field data collection for the next day's report. During the ski season there is a weekend report, too (posted online at [www.mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org/advisory/](http://www.mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org/advisory/)).
2. Lead agency for search and rescue, taking over from the state on Dec. 1.
3. Eastern professional avalanche resource for anyone who needs help. This includes reviewing university projects, giving talks, slide shows, courses, helping reporters and working with volunteer search and rescue groups.



**Jeff Lane has been a snow ranger for the past 10 years. (COURTESY PHOTO)**

The rangers' day begins before dawn at home, when they analyze weather reports and forecasts. They meet at 6:30 a.m. in Pinkham Notch, then head up to Huntington Ravine to look at gullies, avalanche activity, new wind-loaded snow and old wind-scoured snow. Information is collected at the snow plot near the Harvard Cabin. Then off to Tuckerman and the snow plot at Hermit Lake, where they measure snow depth.

"There is less wind at Hermit Lake, which is at 3,800 feet — we can't always get to the summit because of conditions," said Lane. One day the observer at the summit was blown off his feet while carrying the measuring can, he said. "On days like that when we can't measure, we have to estimate."

Lane said the rangers' schedule are seven days a week with staggered days off. "If we can't get there because of weather, we have a sense of what storms do with 60 years of avalanche research. We rely on historical knowledge and make an educated guess," said Lane.

The rangers get out in the field either by hiking up or riding snow machines.

What is the snow pack like this year?

"Lean and boney," said Lane, adding that March usually brings 50 inches of snow. As of Monday, 30 inches had been recorded. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the observatory reports about 40 percent less snow this season.

"The April snow pack hasn't really formed. It looks like December up there," Hoffer said.

"We usually forecast for 10 zones on the mountain. This year, there were three areas that did not receive forecasts. Some ski runs were not skied at all. This was the first time in a long time that I can remember it filled in, but only briefly."

Skiing from the bowl to the Sherburne is not possible now — the bottom section is closed — but there is still some good skiing and as of this writing, the ski leg of the 17th annual Tuckerman Inferno Pentathlon is a go for April 9.

"We are the permit-issuing agency for the Friends of Tuckerman's Inferno race. We have a conversation before the race about the conditions. They do change year to year. The day before the race, we will set the course," Hoffer said.

The last leg of the pentathlon is a climb up Tuckerman Ravine and a ski down a giant slalom course, usually held on the Left Gully, which is tucked in the shade and holds the snow the longest.

"With this cover we can still have great ski conditions; you can't ski to the bottom of the trail but you can still get ski runs in," Lane said.

There are dangers other than avalanches.

"This time of year, we see people ski six or seven runs, then cartwheel; normally, there is usually more snow pack, when they land, they are OK. But now there are rocks and trees, one of the biggest differences this year," said Hoffer.

Spring skiers need to be aware not only of avalanche activity but also crevasses and falling ice. "The waterfalls freeze and then melt. Ice falls off cliffs. There has been more melting ice and more exposed ice this year," says Lane.

"Some places eat away snow differently than last year. There is slim snow pack and there can be running water under snow," says Hoffer.

These conditions make rescues more difficult.

"We don't have the machine access we usually have, so the person being rescued has to be hand-carried out. On a busy day with multiple injuries and less resources, it takes more time," Hoffer said.

And it can get busy.

"We have in the past, done a hand count on a cold but sunny day, between 8 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon. We counted 900 people. Any given day, 500 to 3,000 come through," says Lane.

"This year, the numbers are not there. Last Saturday, we had about 400."

Rangers are available if hikers and skiers have questions about the terrain. "I tell people to climb up what they will ski down, so you know the danger. It is easier to see a crevasse from the top," says Hoffer.

Both Hoffer and Lane stress the importance of recreationalists' studying the avalanche center's information, checking the website for the daily avalanche advisory.

"Our job is to gather all the information for the public so the person can make their own informed decision. ... Personally, I wouldn't want to go out in some of the spring conditions, but it is not our place to tell people what to do," said Lane.

He continued: "If there is an avalanche warning, my advice: 'Don't go.' Or if you go, at least have the right equipment at a minimum, a beacon, a shovel, probe and air bag pack."

Unsure? Ask a reliable source.

"The first question I ask when people approach me is: 'Did you read the advisory?'" says Hoffer.

For more information go to [www.mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org](http://www.mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org) or call the Androscoggin Ranger Station at (603) 466-2713.

---

*The Conway Daily Sun - All Rights Reserved*