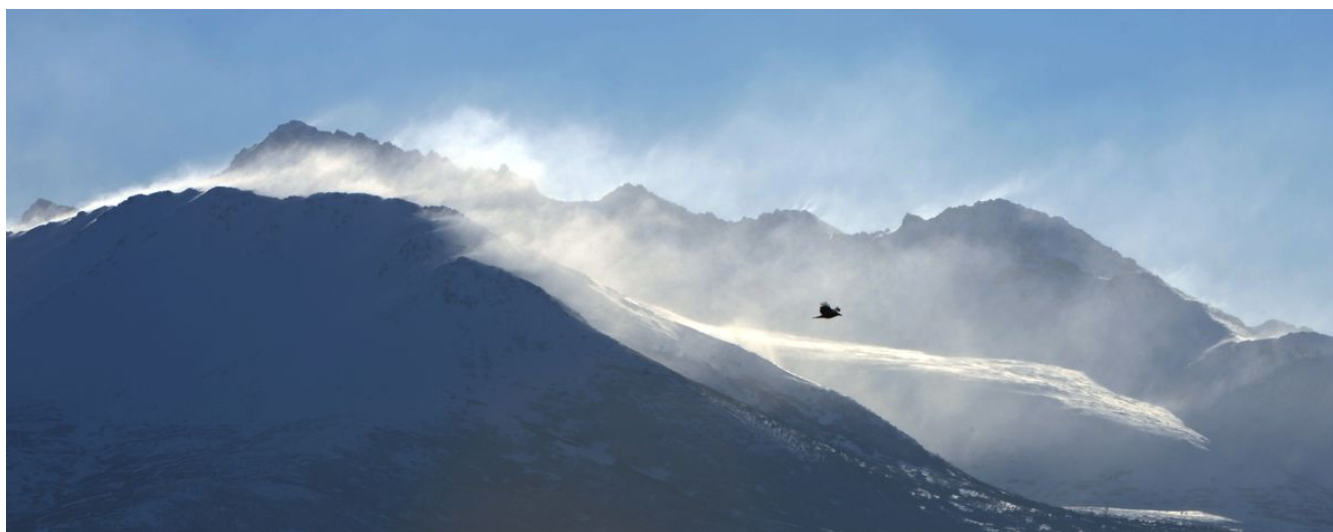


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Avalanche danger spikes after heavy snowfall in Southcentral Alaska

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Avalanche danger has increased significantly in the Chugach Mountains this week. (Erik Hill / Alaska Dispatch News)

Backcountry enthusiasts in Southcentral Alaska wanting to get out after this week's big snowfall should be wary of greatly increased avalanche danger, with potential for worsening conditions by the weekend.

In the Chugach Mountains, heavy snowfall has caused conditions to quickly shift away from relative safety to high risk of avalanches, even at lower elevations, said Mat Brunton, director of the Anchorage Avalanche Center.

"This week could potentially be the most dangerous conditions we had this season," Brunton said.

Brunton monitors conditions in Chugach State Park in Anchorage's backyard, spanning the mountains east of the city from roughly northern Turnagain Arm to the Eklutna Lake area.

A Tuesday snowfall was the first to hit the mountains in about a month, Brunton said, creating a fresh slab on top of existing snow that make both natural and human-caused avalanches likely.

Part of the danger lies in how popular the area is as a backcountry destination, Brunton said. Many people head to the Chugach Mountains every weekend to enjoy skiing, fat biking, snowmachining and other activities.

"A lot of the popular summer trails that people continue to hike on in the winter cross dangerous avalanche paths," Brunton said.

Falls Creek and the Powerline trails are two trails that specifically cross avalanche paths, he said.

Snow started dumping in Anchorage late Tuesday and continued through Wednesday. At Alyeska Resort in Girdwood, 26 inches of snow had fallen at the top of the mountain in 24 hours, according to a snow report posted by the resort Wednesday afternoon.

The Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center on Wednesday listed avalanche danger in that area as high : all terrain levels – even below the treeline, under 1,000 feet of elevation.

Now, the forecast turns toward significant warming, wind and possible rain. Temperatures in the mid-40s are expected by Friday, according to National Weather Service meteorologist Rebecca Duell.

Such conditions could make the avalanche danger even worse, destabilizing the terrain further, Brunton said.

Overall, avalanche danger is on the rise throughout much of Southcentral, said Sarah Carter with the Alaska Avalanche Information Center.

In Hatcher Pass, 5 to 6 inches of snow have fallen since Monday, and that area also now faces warmer temperatures. Avalanche danger is increasing, but more specific measurements won't likely be taken until Saturday, Carter said.

In Valdez, mountainous areas were at "considerable" avalanche danger on Wednesday.

Brunton recommended that only those with basic avalanche training consider a weekend backcountry trip. Take proper avalanche gear: A beacon, shovel and probe, he said.

"People should approach the mountains with a great deal of caution," Brunton said.

About this Author**Laurel Andrews**

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