

RESCUE: Men faced serious threat from extreme cold

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Backcountry Inc.

When DCSO SAR teams arrived at the hut at about 9:31 p.m., it was confirmed there was no one at the shelter, nor were there any fresh tracks in the snow in the immediate area. Four of the six snowmobile riders then deployed on skis to check the cross country trail in both directions that pass by the hut.

At about 9:49 p.m., two DCSO SAR Volunteer skiers located fresh tracks in the snow. At about 10:15 p.m., not one, but two male Nordic skiers were located about .25 miles south of the Happy Hut shelter. One of the skiers, Ted Gifford, 63, of Green Bay, Wisconsin, was suffering from a life-threatening condition as a result of the temperature and snow conditions. The second skier, Robert Skille, 73, of Silverton, Oregon, was found in much better condition, but still extremely cold. DCSO SAR volunteers immediately began warming efforts with Gifford.

It was learned that

Gifford and Skille had been on a multi-day backcountry Nordic ski trip with planned overnight stops at the various Three Sisters Backcountry warming shelters. They began their trip on Tuesday, March 5, but were never able to find their Tuesday night shelter, forcing them to take cover overnight in a tree well. They also had lost one of their cell phones, leaving them with only one cell phone with questionable service. They attempted numerous times to call out on their cell phone without success, before finally getting through with the one broken 911 call.

DCSO SAR volunteers on scene with Gifford and Skille quickly determined Gifford would not be able to move on his own and requested additional volunteers respond to their location to help transport him via rescue sled to the closest snowmobile trail. Five additional DCSO SAR Volunteers responded to the skiers' location to assist with the sled transport of Gifford.

Gifford was transported via rescue sled approximately 300 yards through deep snow and arduous conditions, where volunteers were able to transfer him to an enclosed and heated ambu-sled. The

ambu-sled was then transported via snowmobile back to Mt. Bachelor parking lot, arriving at approximately 2:30 a.m.

“ This tragedy should serve as a solemn reminder of the inherent dangers associated with recreating in the backcountry, especially during cold weather events. ”

Bend Fire Department Personnel were standing by and both Gifford and Skille were transferred to their care as soon as they arrived. Skille had been able to hike to the snowmobile trail with DCSO SAR volunteers and was transported down the mountain on a snowmobile capable of carrying two riders.

Air Ambulances were unable to fly due to the weather conditions. Bend Fire transported both Gifford and Skille to St. Charles Hospital in Bend for further treatment.

The Deschutes County

Sheriff's Office later announced that Gifford died on the evening of March 8. Skille was treated on March 7 and was released.

The Deschutes County Sheriff's Office thanked the Sisters Sno-Gopher Snowmobile Club, who had a trail groomer in the area, which was able to groom the trails between Dutchman Flat through Snowmobile Trail

8 near the area of Happy Hut Shelter. This facilitated a quicker/safer response. DCSO SAR Coordinator Lt. Bryan husband expressed "great sadness" at Gifford's death and noted that, "This tragedy should serve as a solemn reminder of the inherent dangers associated with recreating in the backcountry, especially during cold weather events."

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