



Victor McNeil, director of the Willowa Avalanche Center, uses a snowmobile to travel into the backcountry of Northeastern Oregon and assess avalanche danger.

Victor McNeil/Contributed Photo



Scott Abernethy demonstrates how a two-hook rig under a slip bobber can lead to a double.

Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

## Digging in to find dangers

Willowa Avalanche Center doubles number of weekly forecasts

By JAYSON JACOBY  
Baker City Herald

Victor McNeil travels the backcountry of Northeastern Oregon with a shovel, but he uses the tool for a purpose more profound than freeing a stuck rig.

Saving lives, potentially. McNeil is director of the Willowa Avalanche Center, based in Joseph.

The organization, founded in 2009, monitors the region for avalanche danger that can pose a risk to skiers, snowboarders, snowshoers and snowmobile riders who venture into the region's untrammelled mountains.

A vital part of the Center's work is digging pits in the snow — hence McNeil's ubiquitous shovel — to study the various layers in the snowpack and identify dangers, such as weak or icy sections, that can greatly increase the avalanche risk.

"With avalanche forecasting, you really don't have the full picture until you get out and get your shovel in the snow," McNeil said. "That's a huge part of what we do."

The Center issues forecasts four days each week — Thursday through Sunday — for each of the four zones in this corner of Oregon.

The Center has its biggest annual fundraiser this weekend, the 10th annual Eastern Oregon Backcountry Festival at Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort.

McNeil, who lives in La Grande with his wife, Kelly, who is an avalanche specialist with the Center, said that dividing Northeastern Oregon into zones is necessary because the conditions that contribute to avalanche danger can vary widely among them.

The zones are: Northern Blue Mountains, Elkhorns, Northern Willows and Southern Willows.

That the Willows, a single, albeit extensive, mountain range is separated into two regions illustrates the point.

McNeil said the avalanche danger can be significantly different between the two Willows zones, in part because in most winters quite a bit more snow falls in the southern section of the range.

The Northern Blue Mountains aren't as lofty

as the Willows or the Elkhorns, and thus more prone to thaws and rain during winter, which can result in much different avalanche risks than elsewhere, McNeil said.

"There's a lot of ground to cover," he said. "We want to do the best we can to get out into the field and visit all of the zones."

McNeil said the Center also solicits field reports from experienced backcountry travelers.

All the information is available, for free, on the Center's website: <https://www.willowaavalanchecenter.org/>.

McNeil is the Center's only salaried employee.

Other staff members, in addition to Kelly McNeil, are avalanche specialists Michael Hatch (director of the Outdoor Adventure Program at Eastern Oregon University), Tom Guthrie and Caleb Merrill.

McNeil said all the Center's staff members put in a considerable amount of volunteer work, although they are reimbursed for travel and other expenses.

### Growing interest in learning to recognize avalanche danger

McNeil said the Center's activities, and its budget, have grown over the past four years or so.

The annual budget, which was about \$30,000, has risen to around \$45,000.

McNeil said that unlike some larger avalanche forecast operations, the Willowa Avalanche Center doesn't receive financial support from any government agency. The Center relies on fundraisers such as the Eastern Oregon Backcountry Festival, and grants and other donations.

But the biggest increase in the budget has resulted from the Center's avalanche safety classes, which it started offering four years ago, McNeil said.

With more people traveling into the backcountry in winter — a trend that has accelerated during the pandemic, as people seek less crowded places to play — attendance at the Center's classes has followed suit, McNeil said.

The Center teaches students how to analyze terrain and assess avalanche danger during a three-day course, and how to rescue people caught in a snow slide, a one-day class.

A trio of three-day classes earlier this year attracted about 18 students each, while a one-day course had 21 students, McNeil said. These are



Victor McNeil is director of the Willowa Avalanche Center, which issues avalanche forecasts for four zones in Northeastern Oregon.

Willowa Avalanche Center/Contributed Photo

larger turnouts than in the past, and the additional revenue — three-day courses are \$450, and one-day classes \$125 — make it possible for the Center to expand its work.

This is the first year, for instance, that the Center has issued forecasts four days per week — in past winters there were two forecasts each week, on Thursdays and Saturdays, McNeil said.

"We've developed a bit of a reputation for high-level education," he said.

### Two types of travelers

McNeil said the Center's courses tend to attract two distinct groups of backcountry travelers — snowmobilers, and those who get around under their own power, whether by skis, snowboard or snowshoes.

Generally speaking, snowmobilers who take classes are experienced backcountry travelers, McNeil said, and many have some skills in identifying avalanche dangers even if they don't have the technical knowledge that he and other instructors do.

As for the nonmotorized travelers, McNeil said many who attend the Center's courses are newcomers to mountain travel.

But regardless of the students' mode of travel and experience level, the goal is the same, McNeil said — to teach them to recognize places they should avoid during their trips, and how

to rescue someone who gets caught in an avalanche.

McNeil said that although many of the local snowmobilers he has taught have years or decades of experience traveling through the mountains, they understand the value of knowing how to study terrain and snow conditions to assess the risk level.

At the most basic statistical level, snowmobilers tend to have a higher risk simply because they travel so much faster and cover so much more ground that they're more likely, at some point, to ride into terrain where avalanches pose a threat.

"Riders are just as engaged as the skier group, if not more so, in the classes," McNeil said. "They're just like sponges taking in information. It's pretty cool to see."

### This is avalanche country

Northeastern Oregon is not infamous for deadly avalanches compared with, say, the Alps or parts of the Rocky Mountains.

But that doesn't mean avalanches are uncommon here, McNeil said.

Although the Willows have been branded as "America's Alps," the comparison, however apt in terms of scenery and geology, is flimsy in other respects.

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## Cold beats boredom

Ice-fishing a fine cure for the winter doldrums



DENNIS DAUBLE  
THE NATURAL WORLD

Thirty minutes on the ice and my rod tip has not twitched once. I have jigged every which way I know how and never once felt tension. I dropped my offering until line went slack, reeled up two cranks, and pretended I did not care. Two lure swaps have also not led to action. I haven't given up though. A school of hungry yellow perch should be close by.

A short toss of a corn-hole bag away, Scott sits in a canvas chair and stares at a tiny Thill slip bobber as if doing so will provide answers to the meaning of life. Three fat perch flop beside his gear bag, indicating a patient approach can pay off.

Scott wasted little time putting a 1/8-ounce Triple Teaser in the strike zone, that magic "within one foot of the bottom" layer where yellow perch are said to reside. They reside there because water has a unique property of being most dense at approximately 38 degrees Fahrenheit, a feature that results in conditions being warmest at the bottom of iced-over lakes.

With area streams closed to steelhead fishing, seasonal affective disorder hit me hard this year. Hoping to bust out of my funk, I checked in with a flycaster friend a week prior. Conversation went something like this:

Me: "I'm tired of looking out the window and waiting for snow to melt. Are you up for an ice fishing adventure?"

Ken: "As much as I'd like an outing, I'm not much of a fan. Is the ice even stable?"

Me: "Mullie and Doober were on the ice two days ago. They caught a dozen perch each."

Ken: "Yeah, but they're Midwesterners that don't know any better. Bobber fishing when it's nice out is bad enough. Standing on ice and freezing your butt waiting for a bobber to sink is not that intriguing."

Rejection often leads to introspection. In this case I decided someone having a Great Lakes heritage would more likely embrace the idea of ice fishing than someone who favored dragging Woolly Buggers behind his float tube on a warm spring day. As if to affirm my supposition, a friend from Michigan shared a hot tip. "A source reported catching 100 perch a day at Red Rock Lake," he said. "I have good info on where to fish and what they were using."

Thus began the typical slow dance that often occurs between two busy retirees. What day? When and where to meet? The five-day weather report showed warming to 36 F and no wind at mid-week. A 9 a.m. start time would ensure roads were free of ice and not lead to circadian misalignment.

Scott rolled into the driveway while I laced up my 1,200-gram insulated Blizzard Stalkers. Gear checked and loaded, we skirted the perimeter of the Hanford Reservation under leaden skies, crossed the mighty Columbia River, and continued north through wide-open farm country.

Our route took us past orchard workers trimming apple trees, covered haystacks, circle irrigation pivots, and steel-sided warehouses the size of a football field. A quick review of Google Maps led to a county road south of Royal City and basalt outcrops flanked with big sage and rabbitbrush. Flocks of geese honked noisily as they circled over a series of cattail-lined ponds. Crossing over railroad tracks onto an ice-glazed gravel road, we reached 171-acre Red Rock Lake before noon.

The quarter-mile trek from the parking area involved frozen chunks of slush over 8 inches of clear ice. Two folding chairs, gear bags, and hand-pump ice auger strapped to a circa 1950 Flexible Flyer steel runner sled scraped along. Shouts of glee from anglers sheltered inside a blue nylon tent provided incentive to set up station next to a flock of freshly augered holes.

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