

riding **SAFE**

TREE WELLS a safety hazard

Best defense is to give tree wells a wide berth

submitted by Gene Fulkerson

Tree wells typically form after a big dump of snow. Low hanging branches prevent snow from collecting around the base of an evergreen tree, creating a hollow space.

90 percent of people who fall into tree wells are totally unable to get themselves out. They are usually wedged head first underneath the snow.

I know. It happened to me. And while I wasn't in danger of suffocating, I could not get myself out of the hole. My friends stood around laughing until they realized I was in real trouble. And I was in bounds.

Roughly four people die from snow immersion suffocation in the USA every year. Many more become trapped and luckily are rescued.

If you're heading to the mountains this winter, make sure you know how to rescue yourself or a friend who is stuck in a tree well.

Avoiding Tree Wells

- Carry safety equipment for off piste and tree skiing including:
 - Cell phone with resort emergency number
 - Transceiver / beacon
 - Avalung
 - Compass
 - Whistle
 - Shovel
 - Probe
 - Recco
- Wear bright clothing that does not blend with the terrain.
- Follow proper off-piste and tree-skiing protocol by skiing with a buddy and not using your poles' wrist strap. Your poles should have "powder" baskets.
- In dense tree areas or in poor visibility, ski or ride short pitches and stop to regroup often. Stay within sight of your partner!
- Ski and ride in control.

- Give tree wells a wide berth. Look at the open spaces between trees not at the trees.

Falling into a Tree Well

- As you fall grab any part of the tree and keep your head from sinking too deep into the snow.
- Yell or use a whistle to get your partners attention.
- Resist the urge to struggle, which might only bring more snow down upon you.
- Try to make a breathing space around your face. Stay calm to conserve air.
- Don't try to unclip your skis, unless you are certain you won't sink any deeper.
- Move your body in a rocking manner to create an air space for yourself. Your ability to survive depends on your ability to keep breathing.
- As long as you don't suffocate, your body will heat and compact the snow over time, giving you a better chance of being able to wiggle out.
- Trust that your ski buddies are on their way.

Getting a Ski Buddy Out

- If possible, use your cell phone to call ski patrol or the resort's emergency number.
- Don't leave to get help. Stay with your ski/board buddy!
- IMMEDIATELY begin snow immersion rescue efforts.
- Go directly for the airway, and keep it clear, be careful not to knock more snow into the hole. Clear any snow from the airway and continue necessary first aid or extrication efforts

- Do not try to pull victim out the way they fell in. Instead, determine where the head is and tunnel in from the side.

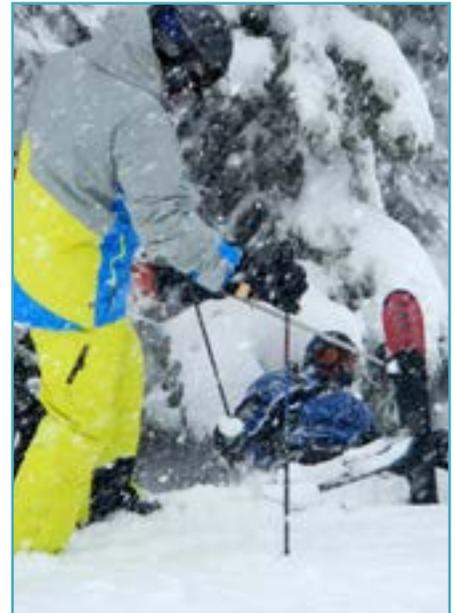


photo courtesy Catherine Ohl

Finding a Ski Buddy

What to do if you did not witness your partner going down but suspect they may have.

- Immediately call resort emergency number and report point last seen.
- If you can not get back to the area where you suspect your partner may be in a timely manner, go to closest lift terminal and notify patrol of your location and stay there until contacted by patrol as what to do next.
- If you do NOT have a cell phone, ask nearest guest to call resort emergency number.
- If phone service is not available and you are unable to return to your partner to help in a timely manner, proceed to nearest location to contact ski patrol or resort personnel. Remember these accidents are "time critical." ■