

# Tragedy in the backcountry

**Two experienced outdoorsmen went for a ski trip in Sequoia National Park, but when an avalanche struck, only one made it out.**

**By Marek Warszawski / The Fresno Bee**

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The avalanche that killed Jason Gardner's friend started with an unmistakable sound.

"Just this deep, earthy rumble," Gardner said. "As soon as I heard it, I knew."

Gardner tried to veer out of its path. He saw chunks of debris beneath his snowboard. Then the wave of snow engulfed him.

"It knocked me senseless, and I'm a big guy," the 6-foot-5, 210-pound Fresno man said.

"I swam to the surface -- just like you're supposed to do -- stuck my head out, took another breath and got tossed around some more.

"It was gymnastics like I can't describe."

Two days earlier, on Jan. 26, Gardner and Morgan Cowles had set off under sunshine and blue skies from Wolverton Meadow in Sequoia National Park to the Pear Lake Hut, a summer ranger station that lodges cross-country skiers and snowshoers during the winter.

It was supposed to be a simple overnight trip, in on Saturday and out Sunday. But the weather turned nasty on their return, forcing Gardner and Cowles to spend Sunday night hunkered down in their tent as a blizzard raged. On the morning of Jan. 28, the two men climbed through fresh powder to Heather Gap, a broad ridge known locally as the Hump.

From there, it's pretty much all downhill -- 3 miles and 2,200 feet -- to the Wolverton parking lot.

At the top, Gardner, 34, and Cowles, 39, both felt a sense of relief, believing the most dangerous terrain was behind them.

### **Finding his friend**

When the avalanche finally stopped, Gardner thrust his arms upward, pierced the snow's surface and cleared the area around his face. He spit out snow and took a deep breath.

Gardner felt a throbbing pain in his left leg. Then his thoughts turned to Cowles, who had been skiing a few yards behind.

"I jumped up and started screaming Morgan's name," Gardner said. "All I heard was a deathly silence, a winter silence."

Gardner ditched his backpack, ripped off his snowboard, fastened his snowshoes and grabbed the probe and shovel he carried for this sort of emergency. Before starting back up the hill, he set his avalanche beacon to pick up the signal being sent by Cowles' unit.

Time was of the essence, and Gardner knew it. Battling waist-deep snow, Gardner trudged about 30 feet before his beacon picked up a reading. It directed him 40 feet uphill and to the right.

Right away, Gardner recognized that he had been spared the brunt of the avalanche. Cowles had been directly in its path.

As Gardner continued uphill, the beacon directed him even farther right and into the gully he had ridden across when the avalanche broke loose. Just over the lip of the gully, he spotted a ski tip sticking out of the snow.

Gardner quickly assembled his probe and began poking air holes in the snow. Then he took out his shovel.

After a couple of minutes of digging, Gardner uncovered Cowles' legs, which were twisted in an unnatural position. Then Gardner realized his friend was lying face down with his head lodged inside the well of a small tree.

Gardner had to dig several more feet before he was able to extract his friend's body.

"I think I knew as soon as I saw him," Gardner said. "There was just a big indentation in his forehead. ... He was blue, he wasn't breathing and he had no

pulse."

Trained in wilderness first aid, Gardner started giving Cowles CPR but got no response. He continued for about 15 minutes before giving up.

"You can't be out that long without breathing," he said.

Gardner sat beside Cowles' body for 10 minutes of silent reflection and goodbyes. "A religious person would have called it a prayer." Tired and cold, Gardner decided to try to make it out himself instead of pitching the tent and waiting for a rescue party.

"I knew he was gone, but it's hard to leave a friend," he said. "It's one of the tougher decisions I've made in my entire life."

Gardner set off in the direction of the marked trail that he and Cowles had purposely left earlier that day.

A search party found him a couple of hours later.

### **Night of anxiety**

Her fiancé hadn't even left the house yet, but Katie Flinn was already worried.

Lying in bed next to Gardner the night before he and Cowles were to depart on their trip to the Pear Lake Hut, Flinn asked him what he would do in case of an avalanche.

Gardner, who had taken several winter survival courses, explained the swimming technique that skiers are taught in order to stay on top of the fast-moving snow. When the avalanche starts to slow down, victims are instructed to push the snow away from their face to create an air pocket.

"We went over step by step what he would do if something like that happened," Flinn said. "We've never had that conversation before."

Flinn always worried whenever Gardner headed into the backcountry, but she took comfort knowing he was with Cowles. The two men met several years ago while both were living in the Seattle area and had shared many adventures, including a mutual love of kite surfing.

Two and a half years ago, Gardner, a Reedley native, moved back to Fresno for a job as a math instructor at Willow International Community College.

Shortly after that, Cowles took a job at University of California at Santa Barbara's Davidson Library as a digital projects conversion coordinator.

"He just loved the terrain of the world," said Greg Hajic, Cowles' colleague at the library. "He was fascinated by maps and aerial photos, and he loved to explore new terrain and new areas."

Reunited in California, Gardner and Cowles went on many hiking trips together, including an ascent of Sawtooth Peak. Last winter, they skied down Mount Tom, a massive peak in the eastern Sierra that overlooks Bishop.

Dick Cowles, Morgan's father, said his son didn't take unnecessary risks. Dad witnessed this personality trait on several occasions, once during a rafting trip on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon.

"He was prudent and respectful" of nature, Dick Cowles said from his home in Santa Fe, N.M. "He used better judgment than I did in a lot of occasions."

On the night of Jan. 25, Gardner and Cowles met at Wolverton, drank beers together under the starry sky and slept in their cars at the trailhead. Both drove Subaru wagons.

Even though both knew a storm was forecast, it wouldn't prevent them from going. They had all the necessary equipment, including a four-season tent, sleeping bags rated to below-zero temperatures, extra layers of clothing, cooking utensils and spare food.

The next morning, after a breakfast of coffee, eggs and sausage, the two men donned their 45-pound packs and headed out in perfect weather toward the Pear Lake Hut.

Back in Fresno, Flinn expected to hear from Gardner by early evening on Jan. 27 that he and Cowles were driving down the mountain. When she hadn't heard anything by 8:30 p.m., her earlier worries resurfaced.

At 9 p.m., Flinn made the first of several calls to the park's 24-hour dispatch, inquiring about road conditions. A half-hour later, she reached Lodgepole ranger Kyle Nelson and asked him to make the short drive to Wolverton to see whether Gardner and Cowles' cars were in the parking lot.

Nelson called Flinn back about 40 minutes later and told her both Subaru wagons were still at the trailhead. They spoke a couple more times that night, with the ranger telling her park officials would search for the overdue men the

next morning.

"I didn't sleep at all that night," Flinn said.

### **The blizzard hits**

At the same time Flinn was tossing and turning, Gardner and Cowles were safe and snug inside their tent at Heather Lake.

It had been an eventful day. That morning, the two men, along with two other parties sleeping at the Pear Lake Hut, awoke to clear skies and howling winds.

The winds were so fierce that Gardner and Cowles scrapped their plans to climb one of several inviting bowls above the hut and carve a few powder turns.

The two left the hut about 10:30 a.m. -- neither carried a watch -- and were soon struggling through soft, thigh-deep snow. Making matters worse, the storm that had been long predicted finally arrived.

By the time Gardner and Cowles got near Aster Lake, following the route recommended when avalanche hazards exist, they were caught in a whiteout.

Navigating by map and compass and barely able to see the yellow diamond signs that mark the route, they finally reached Heather Lake by midafternoon and decided to make camp.

"That's what you do in those situations," Gardner said. "We were getting cold, wet and tired, but we had everything we needed. It was the smart thing to do."

That evening, following a dinner of granola bars and cheese and melting snow to refill their water bottles, the two friends fretted about missing work and how their girlfriends would be worried.

The storm never let up, dumping 18 inches overnight. Next morning, they packed their tent, melted more snow and set off toward the Hump.

For Gardner, who wore snowshoes, the short climb was a struggle. Even when following Cowles' ski tracks, he'd sink nearly to his waist on every step.

It was still snowing, though not as hard as the previous day. But when the two men arrived at the Hump, they lost sight of the trail markers that pointed the way back to Wolverton.

This may sound like a big deal, but it wasn't to experienced backcountry skiers like Gardner and Cowles. Both had been on the route before and knew the general direction.

"I was very glad to finally be able to put on my snowboard," Gardner said. "We were ready to get out. We were done with it."

They agreed on a general plan to follow the ridge north, keeping their elevation, before turning left back toward the marked trail. It seemed like a solid plan.

Cowles went first, but Gardner soon realized there must have been a miscommunication. Instead of keeping to the left side of the ridge, Cowles veered too far to the right and was headed toward what Gardner knew was dangerous terrain.

But Cowles was such a good skier -- he set the slalom course record one year at Sierra Summit's telemark festival -- that Gardner had trouble catching up to him. By the time Cowles stopped to wait, the men were far off course.

The men considered their options.

They could climb back toward the Hump, but both were weary after a day and a half of slogging through soft snow. Or they could cross a small gully just below them and follow what appeared to be gentler terrain along an intervening ridge back toward the marked trail.

"The gully looked like our best bet," Gardner said. "We were in old-growth [trees] on a moderate slope. It's not the kind of terrain where you'd expect a big avalanche.

"We stood there and discussed it for several minutes."

It was their last conversation.

### **Enlisting a rescue team**

Danny Boiano was relaxing at his home in Three Rivers late in the evening Jan. 27 when the phone rang. It was Kyle Nelson, the Lodgepole ranger, asking him to join a search and rescue mission for the two overdue skiers.

An aquatic ecologist for Sequoia National Park, Boiano suggested that Nelson also call plant biotechnician Erik Frenzal, Pear Lake Hut caretaker

Chris Miles, who was away from the hut for the weekend, and seasonal employee John Nelson. All four men are skilled skiers and trained in winter rescue.

By morning, the rescuers were on the trail with Boiano and Frenzal leading the way and Miles and Nelson following about 90 minutes behind.

After three hours of hard slogging, Boiano was almost at the Hump when he met four skiers who had left the hut that morning. They hadn't seen Gardner or Cowles but were following what they assumed were the pair's tracks.

Boiano noticed right away that those tracks led in the wrong direction, toward terrain he knew was steep and avalanche-prone.

"At that point, I started getting a little concerned," said Boiano, adding that the first rule of any rescuer is to avoid becoming a victim as well.

Skiing cautiously as the snow continued to fall, Boiano and Frenzal arrived at a gully that showed recent signs of an avalanche. Miles and Nelson got there a few minutes later.

Across the gully and a little way downhill, less than a half-mile northwest of the Hump, they spotted Cowles' body, which officials later determined had been swept some 200 yards.

"The area ... had all the telltale signs of historical avalanche activity," Miles said. "A lot of small trees, about 2 to 3 feet in diameter, with branches missing on the uphill side."

At first, the rescue party assumed Gardner and Cowles had both been buried. Then Miles spotted another set of tracks leading away.

They knew there had to be a survivor.

"At that point, the situation became even more urgent," Miles said. "We were all concerned about one another as well as this other person that was out there alone and probably injured."

The rescue party followed the tracks, which initially led toward steep cliffs that overlook Lodgepole. They were relieved when the tracks abruptly turned uphill.

About 30 minutes after leaving the avalanche scene, the rescuers spotted Gardner on the opposite side of another sketchy-looking gully.

"He was really happy to see us," Miles said. "Physically, he looked great. Mentally, I could only imagine what he had been through."

The rescue party fed Gardner cold pizza and chocolate-covered raisins and gave him hot tea. They exchanged his heavy pack for a lighter one and together headed toward the marked trail.

Despite the injured knee, Gardner made it back to Wolverton under his own power.

### **Rare occurrence**

When park spokeswoman Alexandra Picavet prepared a news release about the avalanche that caused Cowles' death, Gardner insisted that his name not be included.

"I didn't want to be at the center of a media frenzy," he said.

"I was grieving for the loss of a very good friend and lucky to be alive. Talking to the media wasn't that big a priority."

Gardner probably would have remained silent but for two reasons: He was disturbed at erroneous reports buzzing around the Internet and wanted to set the record straight for the sake of Cowles' family.

"We weren't wandering around lost in a whiteout, as some people have suggested," Gardner said. "We knew where we were the entire time. ...

"It was some miscommunication and bad decisions we made in the field."

Less than two weeks after the accident, Gardner was limping around without crutches. He has a strained MCL and strained quadriceps that will require extensive rehabilitation but not surgery.

Despite Cowles' obvious head and spinal trauma, Tulare County Sheriff/Coroner's Office spokeswoman Sgt. Chris Douglass said the official cause of death was asphyxiation. There was no autopsy.

Due to weather conditions, Cowles' body was not removed until Jan. 29, the day after Gardner's rescue. All told, about 30 people took part in the operation.

No one can be sure what triggered the avalanche, but studies have shown that



the vast majority are caused by the victims themselves.

That means that in all likelihood, Morgan Cowles caused his own death.

"I can't second-guess anything," said Dick Cowles, who accepts Gardner's version of the events. "Hindsight is no good here."

To honor their friend and to offset the costs of the search, Gardner and Flinn initiated a fundraiser through Flinn's downtown Fresno yoga studio, COIL Yoga.

So far, more than \$9,000 has been raised for the Sequoia Parks Foundation, a nonprofit organization that benefits the park.

Picavet said Cowles was the park's first avalanche-related fatality since 1968. Miles, who skis the popular Pear Lake route more than anyone, called the death an "eye opener."

"Sometimes in this part of the Sierra, we get complacent because we don't see a lot of avalanches," Miles said.

After all he's been through, Gardner doubts he'll be exploring the backcountry during the winter anytime soon.

He hopes others, especially those with advanced skills, can learn from his experience.

"Be a little more cautious, a little more respectful and a little more scared," Gardner said. "Some people think they're made out of Teflon, that they're going to be able to get through everything. And they're not. They're not. ...

"My skills saved [my life] but not my buddy's. I'll have to live with that forever."

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