News

8 backcountry skiers found dead and 1 still missing after California avalanche 8 backcountry skiers found dead and 1 still missing after California avalanche



Angel Tapi tries to install chains on his tires while stuck in the snow along interstate 80 during a storm Thursday, Feb. 19, 2026, near Camp Spaulding in Placer County, Calif.

(AP PHOTO/GODOFREDO A. VÁSQUEZ)

TRUCKEE, Calif. (AP) — Crews found the bodies of eight backcountry skiers near California's Lake Tahoe and were searching for one more after they were caught in an avalanche, the nation's deadliest in nearly half a century, authorities said Wednesday.

Authorities said the skiers had little time to react.

"Someone saw the avalanche, yelled 'Avalanche!' and it overtook them rather quickly," said Capt. Russell "Rusty" Greene, of the Nevada County sheriff's office.

Six were rescued six hours after the avalanche hit Tuesday morning as they were concluding a three-day trek in Northern California's Sierra Nevada during a monster winter storm. The tour included four guides, three of whom are presumed dead, authorities said.

The group was a mix of women and men between the ages of 30 and 55, authorities said. Some of the people killed were members of the Sugar Bowl Academy community, a private boarding school and ski and snowboard club on Donner Summit, according to the academy. School officials did not release the names of those killed or describe their connection to the academy.

Nevada County Sheriff Shannan Moon said investigators would look into the decision to proceed with the trip on Sunday despite the forecast. That morning at 6:49 a.m., the Sierra Avalanche Center issued an avalanche watch, indicating that large avalanches were likely in the next 24 to 48 hours.

Hours before the avalanche hit, the center increased the watch to a warning, which means avalanches are expected. It's unclear if the guides would have known about the change before they began their trek out of the wilderness.

With one person unaccounted for, authorities' mission moved from rescuing people to recovering bodies, Moon said.

Authorities were waiting to release the victims' names to give the families time.

"They're still reeling," Moon said. "I could not imagine what they're going through."

The victims were found fairly close together, Greene said. The crews have not yet been able to remove the victims from the mountain because of the extreme conditions.

Three to 6 feet (91 centimeters to 1.8 meters) of snow has fallen since Sunday. The area was also hit by subfreezing temperatures and gale force winds. The Sierra Avalanche Center said the threat of more avalanches remained Wednesday and left the snowpack unstable and unpredictable in an area known for its steep, craggy cliffs.

Rescuers were guided by beacons and a cellphone in dangerous conditions

Rescuers reached the survivors just before sunset on Tuesday.

The skiers all had beacons that can send signals to rescuers and at least one of the guides was able to send text messages, but it wasn't clear if they were wearing avalanche bags, which are inflatable devices that can keep skiers near the surface, Greene said.

While they waited to be rescued, the survivors used equipment to shelter themselves and fend off temperatures dipping below freezing. They found three others who had died while they waited, Moon said.

Rescuers used a snowcat to get within 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) of the survivors, then skied in carefully so they didn't set off another avalanche, the sheriff said.

One of those rescued remained hospitalized Wednesday, Moon said.

The area near Donner Summit is one of the snowiest places in the Western Hemisphere and until just a few years ago was closed to the public. It sees an average of nearly 35 feet (10.6 meters) of snow a year, according to the Truckee Donner Land Trust, which owns a cluster of huts where the group was staying near Frog Lake.

The avalanche is the deadliest in the U.S. since 1981, when 11 climbers were killed on Mount Rainier in Washington state. Each winter, 25 to 30 people die in avalanches in the U.S., according to the National Avalanche Center.

It was the second deadly avalanche near California's Castle Peak this year, after a snowmobiler was buried by one in January.

Skiers were heading for the trailhead when the avalanche struck

Greene said authorities were notified about the avalanche by Blackbird Mountain Guides, which was leading the expedition, and the skiers' emergency beacons. The sheriff's office said Tuesday night that 15 backcountry skiers had been on the trip, not 16 as initially believed. One skier had pulled out at the last minute, Moon said.

The skiers were on the last day of the backcountry trip and had spent two nights in huts, said Steve Reynaud, an avalanche forecaster with the Sierra Avalanche Center.

Reaching the huts in winter takes several hours and requires backcountry skills, avalanche training and safety equipment. Blackbird said the tour was for intermediate-to-expert skiers.

The area near Donner Summit was closed for nearly a century before it was reopened by the Truckee Donner Land Trust and its partners in 2020. Donner Summit is named for the infamous Donner Party, a group of pioneers who resorted to cannibalism after getting trapped there in the winter of 1846-1847.

When asked what went through her mind as her staff and volunteers responded to the scene, Moon said she was hoping they would be able to make it there safely. Once they did, she said she was "immediately thinking of the folks that didn't make it, and knowing our mission now is to get them home."

Watson reported from San Diego and Seewer from Toledo, Ohio. Associated Press writers Christopher Weber in Los Angeles, Trân Nguyen in Sacramento and Hallie Golden in Seattle contributed to this report.



A map showing the location of an avalanche in California.

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