

Glenmore Avalanche course

by Graeme Ralph



A reasonably snowy but wind affected Cairngorms - Graeme Ralph

What do you get if you bring together good snow cover in the Cairngorms and a group of ski tourers of varying age and experience all looking to learn about avalanches? If you manage to hook up with an experienced instructor then it's a perfect combination. This is what brought together Mags and Adam, Neil, Dean, Chris and I along with teacher Malcolm, at Glenmore Lodge for a weekend of 'Avalanche Awareness for Back Country Skiers' in early March 2020 following a month of cold, stormy weather.

We all met up straight after breakfast on the Saturday morning for an introduction to Glenmore Lodge, along with others attending a huge variety of other winter related courses. Those that required it could borrow any of the equipment needed, but we all had our own touring equipment so got straight to work in the classroom. Malcolm gave us an outline of what to expect, and to my relief indicated that we would be out on the hill for around half of each day for practical learning.

We began by looking at the range of easily accessible online mountain weather forecasts on the basis that this would determine whether a tour was possible at all, followed by a detailed look at how to use and interpret the excellent Scottish Avalanche Information Service daily reports of avalanche risk, combined with the blogs left by their field staff which are accompanied by photographs and which are a valuable addition to the written reports. Using both of these sources of information along with a map we planned a half day outing to look at features on the ground in spite of the wild, windy and wet conditions expected.

Once out on the hill Malcolm highlighted the importance of being aware of what we were finding around us and how it compared with the avalanche report – and vitally whether we needed to compare what we had read against what we were seeing on the ground, and the resulting potential need for a change of route. We looked at the 4 A's – Aspect, Altitude, Angle and Anatomy of the slopes around us and how each affected the build-up of snow. We dug pits and assessed the different layers within the snow including microscopic viewing of the snow types to check for any weaker layers. A transceiver rescue practice concluded our outing.

Back at the lodge coffee and cake was followed by a debrief of what we had learned that day, and initial planning for our outing on day 2. In the evening there were a couple of very informative lectures for the attendees of all courses on winter mountaineering topics.

Sunday was a calmer and sunnier day. We looked at various aspects of snow science in the classroom, along with the human influences on group dynamics and its effect on decision making and safety in general and with particular reference to avalanches. We discussed avalanche red flags to watch for when out in winter conditions such as new snow, existing avalanche evidence, rapid warming etc. Next, we spent some time planning a suitable half day trip, gathered our gear and headed out to use some of our new found skills on a much colder day with plenty of blowing snow and moderate visibility.



Snow profiles - Graeme Ralph



There is a lot to cover on a course like this, but I am pleased to say that Malcolm found a good balance between classroom and on the hill, teaching aided by the good snow cover and reasonable weather conditions. I would recommend this course for those of you who want to ski tour safely, and would like to thank AAC(UK) for helping to fund my course.