

Using the compass

A compass is one of the most useful, and yet most mis-used, outdoor survival tools out there. I can best explain that with a story.

When I was a kid, I learned about a compass in the Boy Scouts. We studied the manual and had a class taught by our leaders. After that, I figured I knew everything there was to know about a compass.

Since Columbus could sail across the ocean and discover a new world with one, surely I could find my way out of the woods.

I went out on a hike and somehow got a bit disoriented (nice word for lost). I immediately brought out my compass. It faithfully pointed the red end of the needle to north. Great, now I knew where north was but had no idea where to go to return home.

I secretly vowed to one day invent a compass that pointed to something more useful, such as the truck, camp or home.

The heart of any compass is an ionized and magnetized needle, swinging freely on a sapphire bearing.

The needle's red end will align itself with the earth's magnetic force fields, thereby pointing out the magnetic north.

The compass has a dial that is marked off in 360 degrees clockwise and has on it the four di-

rections. Most compasses have a direction of travel arrow (DOT) on them for you to sight down on.

This dialogue is much too short to go into map orientation and the like, so we will concern ourselves with using it in the outdoors.

The idea with a compass is to use it to stay "found." It can guide you along your way and help you stay aware of where you are and where you are heading. It does little good to bring it out after you have lost your way.

When you head off on a hike, you could just strike out with the compass in your hand, doing your best as you bounce along to keep the needle pointed in the direction you want to travel.

That is probably the only way to use a compass in dense woods or in a fog where forward visibility is limited, but there is a much easier way. It is called the intermediate objective method.

Hold the compass up to your eye and sight down the DOT arrow. Choose a prominent landmark somewhere in a middle distance along the route you intend to take. A large rock, isolated tree, manmade structure, even a mountain peak are all good examples.

By keeping the intermediate objective in your sight as you walk, you're free to look around and enjoy the scenery. You can even stray off course to explore something as long as you don't lose sight of your marker.

This method also eliminates the worry about whether or not you are walking in a straight line. When you reach the marker, repeat the process to select the next one on your intended course, and do so until you reach your final objective.

A straight line is the shortest distance between two points, over a level surface. Anyone who spends any time in the mountains of western Colorado knows that there really is no such thing as level ground.

Even if the ground is relatively flat, it could be littered with obstacles. Going around them will slow your progress and drain your energy. Enter the concept of handrails.

A handrail is any longitudinal terrain feature that more or less follows your intended direction of travel. It could be a road, stream, fence line, gully or ridgeline.

In most cases, following a handrail will increase your travel distance, but will make for much easier going and free you from the necessity of keeping your eyes glued to the compass.

You can use this method to perhaps walk around the large area of deadfall timber, rather than have to hike through it.

With the invention of GPS, it seems that use of the compass has faded away somewhat. I suggest that you always carry and use a compass when outdoors. The secret to not getting lost is staying found. A compass is a great tool for that.

Besides being small a lightweight, a compass does not need batteries. Until next time, see you on the trail.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse, (970) 252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay



Descending toward the Jud Wiebe trail, John Unger enjoys a run through this year's brilliant fall colors. (Courtesy photo)

Jud Wiebe trail has fall color views

It would be great if a person could walk a few blocks in a tourist town and quickly leave the commercial district behind for a forest hike, when the spirit moves.

Such is the case in Telluride with the Jud Wiebe trailhead, at the north end of Aspen Street.

Assuming that the art galleries, bars, restaurants and beautiful historic architecture have been toured enough, a well-prepared hiker or runner can put one foot in front of the other and be up in the Sneffels Wilderness area before the first water bottle is half empty.

But a recommended morning start is safer. It is best to hike

the forest first, and then consider spending the afternoon in the town itself.

While hiking guidebooks typically advise the general public to allow six to eight hours for the thirteen mile loop version, trail runners who are prepared with map and essentials often do it in three hours. Fit, altitude acclimated hikers can expect less than six hours to complete the loop, although losing one's way, even with a topo map in hand, happens to locals and tourists alike.

This area is part of the Uncompahgre National Forest, and has several differing lengths of hikes accessed by the Jud Wiebe trail. Among these (in order of increasing distance and difficulty) are the Waterline Trail, the Liberty Bell Loop, and the Sneffels Highline Trail.

Waterline Trail

If you are hiking with small children or with adults who are unused to exertion at altitude, the Jud Wiebe trail can be hiked for an hour out and an hour back. This involves heading west on the Waterline Trail, named for the abandoned iron pipe, still visible along the trail.

This out-and-back option allows groups who may have overestimated their hiking abilities to be able to turn around sooner than later. Even so, a mile of this route has little elevation gain or loss, while it permits impressive views down into the valley of the San Miguel.

Liberty Bell Loop

This loop is as difficult as the previous trail is easy. It takes the runner east instead of west from the upper end of the Jud Wiebe trail, and eventually it goes to the historic Liberty Bell mine. The mine is defunct but produced enormous amounts of gold in its heyday in the late 1800s, along with many deaths due to several enormous avalanches that took place in the very early 1900s.

Nowadays an informed guide or guidebook is

needed to follow this trail. Expansive views and impressive forests are the rewards pursued. Old-growth Douglas Fir trees along this trail are an amazing sight, and are of such size that a grown man trying to reach both arms around the trunk of one will fall short by two or three feet in the attempt.

Sneffels Highline Trail

For my time and energy, this trail is the best reason (of many good reasons) to head up the Jud Wiebe trail. By continuing north, the 13-mile loop mentioned earlier is possible. Along the way, one passes through Pack Basin and its old-growth trees, after topping out at close to 12,300 feet on the pass that leads to the foot of Mount Emma.

Though the waist-deep wildflowers frosted out over a month ago, until the snows come there still are amazing sights along this route. Glacial springs here run most of the summer and may continue into early autumn.

On this counterclockwise route, Mill Creek Basin is entered next, though much elevation is lost and then regained to get there. Words often fail to give any accurate impression of the broad vistas and impressive landforms it contains.

The trail then joins the Deep Creek trail and then the Waterline trail on the way back.

The lollipop stem of the Jud Wiebe leads back to the now well-earned refreshments of civilization in the town below.

If you go: If you will be hiking anything more than half a mile up from the town, be sure you first have the Telluride Quadrangle, 7.5 minute topographic map from the United States Geological Survey. Do not trust only a GPS unit or a cell phone containing Google Earth, as geographic features here can interfere with the signal.

Beyond the trailhead, signage on these trails is often missing, despite the best efforts of the Forest Service to frequently replace signs that have been removed by passersby. In addition to a detailed map, consider using Susan Kees' book "Telluride Hiking Guide", Third Edition. It offers great guidance, along with the area's historical information that is not otherwise widely available.

Especially because the forest and wilderness area are so easily accessed on foot from the town, there is an elevated risk of entering the area without adequate water, food and foul weather gear. Again, a morning start is best with this risk in mind, especially now that it is autumn with earlier sunsets, and an error in trail choices could lead to discomfort or disaster.

John T. Unger is a Diplomate of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, with more than 25 years of practice in Montrose, and more than that many completions of this 13-mile loop. Ideas for future columns are welcomed at sportsdocunger.com.



Outdoors

By John Unger



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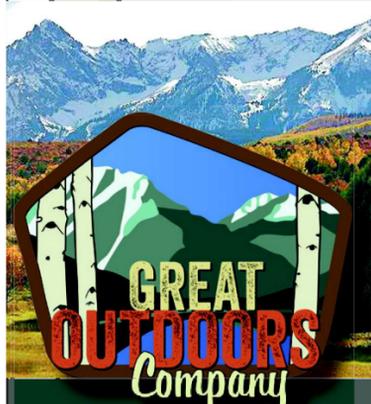
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