

A study of fatalities

There is no limit to the ways a person can die in the backcountry. Old Mother Nature has a storeroom full of tricks to pull on outdoor persons, many of which can issue you a one-way ticket west. Add to that, if Mr. Murphy takes a part in the proceedings, you may really get to paradise a hair ahead of schedule.

The very possibility that we might not make it home alive, the ever-present element of danger, just adds to the thrill of our chosen outdoor pursuits. The point I hope to make with this column is that we don't want to add to those statistics, if we can help it.

I have been a first responder, involved in law enforcement and search and rescue for a great many years. Our sheriff's posse recently had a gathering and I was in attendance. One of the topics discussed was the nightmare of a search, turning into a recovery.

Nationwide, search and rescue teams (SAR) execute about 3,500 missions into the backcountry annually. About a quarter of those missions are related to hiking injuries, and a quarter of those are hiking related fatalities.

There are a few accidents annually that are caused by mind boggling acts of idiocy but the largest percentage of deaths in the backcountry have always been attributable to three things: lack of knowledge, lack of experience and poor judgment. It would seem that these are things we can prevent. Sure, there are going to be times that Murph just dumps on you, but more often that not, if you stop and think something through, disaster can be averted.

The No. 1 backcountry killer is falls. Most happen when hikers try climbing up, or descending down, slippery and loose slopes, getting too far out on overlooks, rotten rock bands or gravelly ledges. Add to that operating without a lifeline and acting with over-confidence, and you have a fall in the making.

Hike smart and these can usually be avoided. If it looks sketchy or if you are having doubts, find another way around. Don't take the unnecessary chance, especially when hiking alone.

Recent years have placed drowning as the second major cause of outdoor related fatalities. Almost half of all drowning occur in natural waters, with the rest occurring in pools and bathtubs.

How to avoid? Stay away from ice covered lakes, ponds and streams. If you must cross, practice all safety measures using the buddy system and ropes.

Fast water, such as streams during



(Above left) A trip into the wilderness is a fantastic experience. Be sure to not fall victim to any of the common mistakes that take a life. (Above right) A trip gone bad in the backcountry can lead into a ride home in one of these, or worse. Pay attention to the little things and don't take chances when outdoors. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)



flood season and runoffs are another area of concern. Learn self-rescue for fast water such as floating on your back and pointing your feet downstream in the event of a fall. Never try to stand up because your foot can get caught between rocks and the current could push you over and you drown. Better to avoid crossing the stream if possible.

Wear a life jacket anywhere near the water. Over three quarters of all drowning victims had no life vest.

Right up with drowning ranks avalanche related deaths. These are rare for hikers but a real concern for backcountry skiers and snowmobilers. Many of these can be avoided by picking your day. Cold days are better than warm ones and avoid steep slopes during or after strong wind events.

Have the members of your party spread out. Try and stay 200 or more feet apart and avoid getting caught altogether. Turn back, and revisit questionable slopes another day.

Heart attacks and health issues nail a fair number of hikers each year. Simply heeding the advice of your doctor can prevent many of these. We run into people every year, with a known heart or other medical condition, who don't take it seriously, head for the hills and over-exert.

People who live near sea level and come to Colorado for vacations or

hunting are especially at risk. You must try to be in good physical condition and allow yourself some time to acclimate to the high altitude. Slow down, acclimate, hydrate, don't over-exert and many of these heart attacks can be avoided.

Heat stroke and hypothermia or exposure claims quite a few people in the woods each year. Sometime this occurs after they suffer an unrelated injury, but usually not. This is very preventable by bringing the proper clothing, dressing in layers, staying dry and not exerting yourself during extreme heat or cold. The vast majority of the exposure deaths happened to people who were ill-prepared. Preparedness is something I preach in this column relentlessly and I think my readers understand what happens to the underprepared quite well.

This brings us to ATV, snowmobile and motorcycle accidents. These hurt me personally the most because many times it involves children. Accidents such as these are very preventable. We recently had a man killed on an ATV because of a head injury, after he slid down a steep bank and rolled his machine. He had a collection of scrapes and bruises that were mostly superficial. A head injury killed him and a helmet would have saved his life.

Learn how to ride. Classes are available from any of the dealers around town, as well as online. Supervise kids when they

ride, as kids will take far more chances than adults. Most of all, wear a helmet and other safety equipment. Well over half the annual fatalities could have been avoided if the rider was wearing a helmet.

There are some calamities that usually can't be avoided. On average, 165 people die annually because of animal versus vehicle collisions. Another five people perish from bites from venomous snakes and 50 from lightning strikes. Seems to me, for most of those folks, their number was just up.

Colorado ranks high on the danger list. In 2014, Colorado was the deadliest state in the Union, with the worst months being June and August. With all our beauty and high country comes the risk.

Stop and think before you take any risk while in the outdoors. If your activity involves a skill, practice and train. Make certain you and your equipment are up to the task. We don't want you to end up as a statistic. Remember, when the bell tolls, it is not always a collect call for you.

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Leave young wildlife alone

STAFF REPORT

Colorado Parks and Wildlife reiterates its annual warning not to interfere with young wildlife.

Each year, the agency receives several calls regarding baby animals that have been "abandoned." Other well-intended people try to help the animal by picking it up, feeding it, or taking it to wildlife facilities or CPW offices.

But these are not the things to do. The young animals need their natural parents and it is normal for adults to leave the young alone in a safe place as they forage for food. In the case of baby birds, though people are quick to deem them abandoned, in most cases, they are just learning to fly and likely near their nests.

"Baby mammals are scentless in order to prevent predators from finding them," said Janet George, senior terrestrial biologist for CPW, in a news release from the agency.

"When humans touch these

animals, they leave behind a scent their adults will not recognize or may even fear. This can result in true abandonment of healthy offspring. It is best for people to leave them alone."

Because birds do not have a highly developed sense of smell, baby songbirds can be picked up and moved out of harm's way or placed back in their nests if absolutely necessary.

Raptors, however, are a different story. Great-horned owls and other birds of prey are territorial and have been known to fly directly at humans seen as a threat to their young.

Deer fawns found in backyards are frequently brought to wildlife offices. They have not been abandoned so don't touch them.

If you do encounter young wildlife on the trail or in your yard, leave the animal where it is, and be careful to keep pets out of the area.

Use binoculars to quietly view the animal from a distance. It's important not to get too close to the animals,

or linger near them, as human proximity and time spent in the area may make the wild parents afraid to return.

If 24 hours pass and the parent does not return, or a young animal appears sick and weak, it is possible the newborn was abandoned or the parent may be unable to return due to sickness or death.

In this instance, concerned citizens should call the nearest CPW office, in Montrose, 970-252-6000. Never move an animal yourself.

In addition to potential harm to the animal, there is a potential for harm to humans. Handling wildlife poses risks, including disease transmission of rabies, distemper or other illnesses. Wildlife can also carry fleas that might subsequently spread disease to humans or pets.

It is illegal to feed or own most wildlife in Colorado, so despite best intentions, "adopting" a wild animal rarely leads to good outcomes. Hand-fed animals with no fear of humans are rarely returned to the wild due to their lack of



Two fawns glance at a camera lens. If you encounter young wildlife, leave the animal where it is and keep your distance. (Submitted photo/CPW)

survival skills.

Licensed wildlife rehabilitators are trained to use methods that will give a wild animal the best chance of surviving upon release. CPW asks people to call the agency or these rehabilitators to ensure the best outcome for animals.

For more information on living with wildlife, visit <http://cpw.state.co.us/learn/Pages/LivingwithWildlife.aspx>. Information from CPW news release.

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