


A tale of two hunters, the survival pack



Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Imagine if you will, a tale of two hunters. Both left from separate camps, and different locations on the Uncompahgre plateau. They thought it would be a fun filled hunting trip, but little did they know, it was a trip so deep into the “survival zone” that Rod Serling wouldn’t be able to help them.

This actually is a story about separate trips, involving real people who were eventually the star characters of a search-and-rescue mission. I have changed the names in order to protect the innocent.

The first hunter, Dad, left camp shortly after lunch, hopping to bag an elusive mountain turkey. His son decided to go another direction, and they agreed to meet back at camp near dark. The weather was fair, except for heavy cloud cover.

Dad chased a tom through the woods until finally the bird took a roost. Dad decided to leave and come back in the morning to pick up the chase. Darkness descended very quickly, with virtually no twilight time because of the cloud cover. Dad quickly lost track of his visual reference points and basically had no idea whatsoever where he was.

Dad made the decision to stay put. He had a backpack filled with emergency supplies, a little food, and some bottles of water. Dad decided to build a fire, stay put, and gather his bearings while waiting for morning’s light. This was a wise decision.

Meanwhile, Son called for help around 8 p.m. and by 10 p.m., search and rescue was on scene. A hasty search was conducted, but because Dad had no apparent health concerns, and Son said Dad was equipped for a night out, all further search efforts were called off until first light.

At first light, Dad quickly regained his bearings, and walked back into camp. Dad was prepared for the emergency and survived with no problems. The Dad and Son resumed their hunt together that morning while search and rescue headed back to town for breakfast.

In another camp, Joe Hunter left out on an elk hunt. The weather was clear and unseasonably warm. Joe decided that he was not going far and there was no need for extra clothes or a backpack. Joe thought he would just hightail it back if the weather turned sour.

The weather did turn sour, as is so common in the mountains during November. A rapidly moving cold front brought winds and rain, which quickly turned to heavy, wet snow. Poor Joe was soaked to



(Above) Before you take to the woods this fall, make sure you have a survival pack and know how to use it. (Right) Here are a few of the items in my pack when I take to the woods. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

the skin by the rain and was quickly losing body heat from wet clothes and wind. Joe was in serious trouble. Night fell, and with hypothermia setting in, Joe had no idea who he was, let alone where he was.

Joe’s hunting buddies had sense enough to call for help right at dark. With the diminishing weather conditions, and information that Joe was not properly equipped, search and rescue responded to conduct a nighttime search.

Rescue personnel headed off in the direction indicated by his hunting partners. Within a few minutes, searchers came across Joe’s tracks in the snow. This was a mere stroke of luck, and one that probably saved Joe’s life. The searchers found Joe, barely hanging onto consciousness, in a state of hypothermia. Joe survived the ordeal after spending a few days in the hospital and will have a story to tell his grandkids.

I wish I could tell you that Joe’s ordeal was out of the norm, but I cannot. I see this scenario play out every year, every hunting season, multiple times. Some of those searches turn into a “recovery.” In all cases, it could have been prevented with some preparation, training, and a little thought about the “what ifs” of your excursion in case all does not go as planned.

Regular readers of this column know that I annually write about the importance of a survival pack. The pack is mentioned as standard equipment for just about all outdoor excursions and activities. It astonishes me that every year people are stranded in the woods without equipment or skills to stay alive, even though it is preached at them endlessly.

The truth is, the woods are not the place to give Murphy’s Law a test. Mother Nature has no



sense of humor. She will change the weather in an instant, hide your visual reference points, and partner with Murphy to throw an injury at you. While you are fighting for your life, the two of them are laughing themselves silly and eating the last of the cookies in your pack.

This year, let’s all build a survival pack and spend some time training/practicing the use of the items contained therein. Try and visualize any emergency you may encounter and what your response will be. There is no such thing as over preparing or over training.

Here are a few of the things that I carry in my personal pack:

- Compass and GPS — It is most important to take a waypoint for your starting place on the GPS. This way, you always have a Lat/Lon number to head home to.
- Signal mirror and whistle-these are great for helping searchers locate you in the event of an emergency.
- Knife and leatherman tool.
- Flashlight and extra batteries.
- Waterproof matches, lighter,

fire starter-fire can be used for signaling and warmth.

- Drinking water — some packs come with a hydration bladder built in.
 - Food-power bars, trail mix, jerky etc. High energy snacks with protein.
 - Cell phone — keep power off to save battery. The battery power will run out quickly searching for service. Carry a portable battery pack to recharge the phone.
 - Small first aid kit — carry only essential items, such as a tourniquet, Israeli Bandage, couple band-aids, etc. keeping weight in mind. Be sure that you have any essential prescription drugs you may require. Some other items you may consider if space allows:
 - Rain poncho.
 - Solar bivy. You can crawl in one of these to keep warm.
 - Toilet paper, a must.
 - Duct tape — for first aid and repairs.
 - Pencil and paper.
- Carry extra ammunition for your firearm. I have seen many cases in which a hunter was able

to signal for help firing the universal three well-spaced shots, and we were able to respond.

One other item that you should carry is extra warm clothing. In the mountains, the temperature can drop 30 or more degrees in a matter of minutes. Having some dry clothes will help in case you get wet.

Dad and Joe’s experience was based on actual missions last year. Dad had a minor inconvenience and something to laugh about. Joe got a pretty hefty hospital bill. At least he is alive to pay it, rather than it getting paid from his estate. And you thought that people only got lost in the “twilight zone?”

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