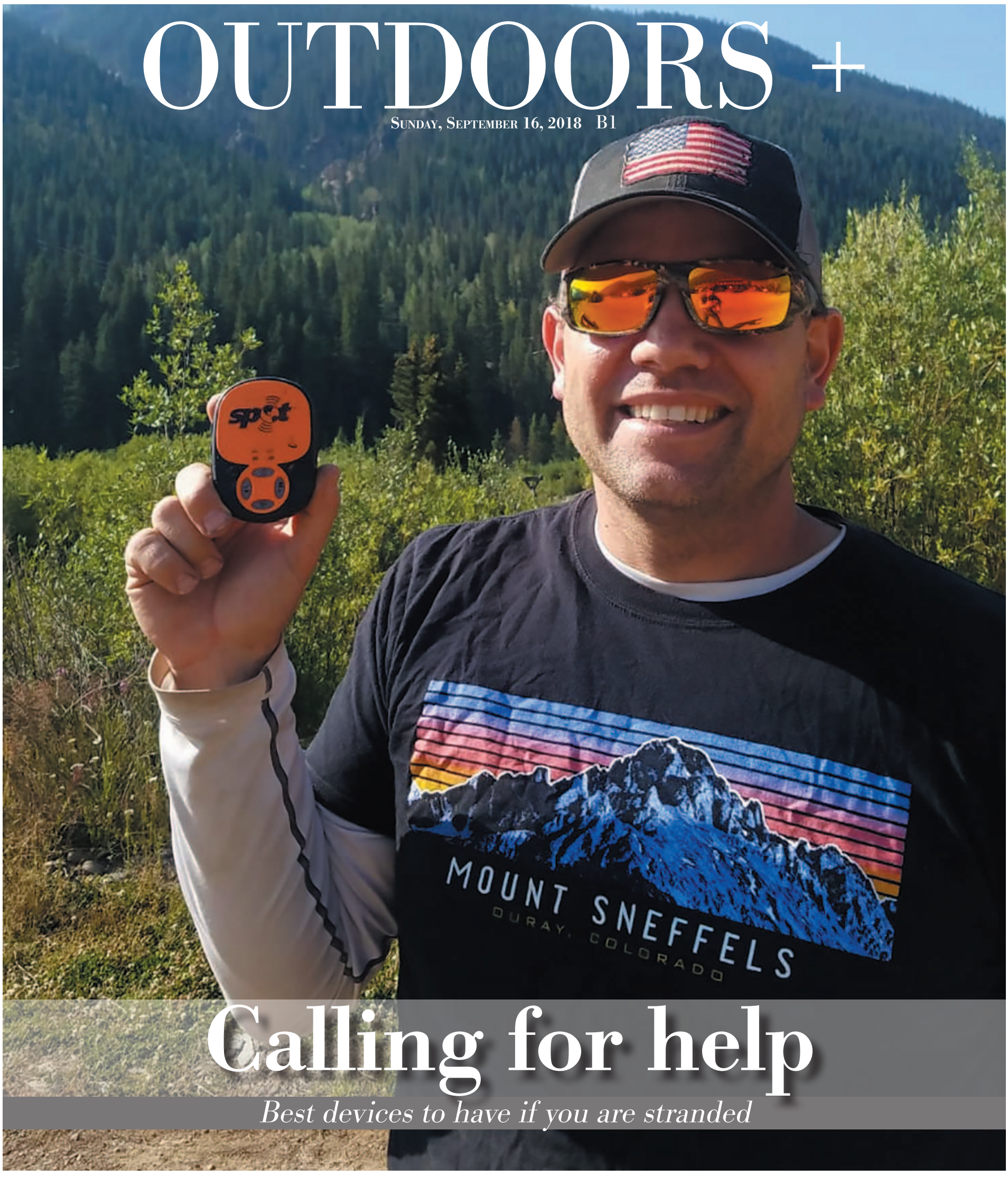

Calling for help

Best devices to have if you are stranded

Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Occasionally I write an article that stirs up all kinds of comments and questions from readers. This is a good thing for several reasons. One is that it gets you thinking about the "what-ifs" in the outdoor world. When the feces impacts the oscillator in the woods, you cannot save yourself unless you have previously prepared and trained.

The second reason I enjoy hearing from readers is the sharing of ideas. The survival world is a constant learning curve. We try things. Sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't. Hopefully the things that don't work serve as learning experiences and not something to leave you in a state of terminal meditation.

One such column appeared in the Outdoors + section July 29. The column was called "Going Alone," and discussed many of the problems and possible solutions for someone who takes off into the wilderness alone.

I had no fewer than a dozen folks ask me to write about backcountry communications and how to summon help. We will limit this discussion to electronic communication devices and discuss the traditional methods of signaling in another column. For the purpose of this article the discussion will cover cell phones (lightly), personal locator beacon (PLB), satellite emergency notification devices (SEND), and the satellite phone.

I have intentionally left off the two-way radio, or walkie-talkies. These are usually inexpensive, have a very limited range of communication capability, and operate mostly on a "line of sight." I used these a number of times on trips and found them to be fairly useless in an emergency unless the person I wanted to contact was visible.

The two-way radio requires someone on the other end, with the same channel, listening. With my luck, the only person I can ever hail in a crisis is Murphy, so I stopped using them. Emergency services do not monitor the channels used by these small radios either. I would use them for entertainment purposes only, but never rely on them in an emergency.

The one device that most of us have is the cell phone. We have talked about them in other articles, and they have a few shortcomings. The major problem is lack of signal coverage in remote areas. As my luck goes, when I need the cell phone, I have no signal. This brings us to the "call when you can, and text when you can't" line. A text will get sent when service is available, even if just momentarily.

The other concern for cell phones is the battery life. The phone searching for service eats up the power. Keeping the phone on Airplane mode saves power, but carrying an extra power pack is a good idea. I would carry the cell phone in addition to one of the other devices.

This brings us to the PLBs. These devices are used to send out an emergency distress signal in a real life-or-death" situation. When activated, the device sends a message to an international satellite rescue system. It is a joint network of American, Canadian, Russian and French military satellites.

The signal is received by a control center, which notifies local search-and-rescue teams. There are several on the market, one being the ACR ResQ Link PLB. They are very lightweight and require no monthly subscription service but must be registered for use with the government. I set one off once, and halfway expected to see a squadron of MiG-23s on the horizon.

The bad thing about them is there is no two-way communication, and once you activate it, you can't take it back. The PLB does not have any way of tracking your location.

A very similar device is called an EPIRB and is used on boats. We carried one for years for our offshore fishing. The EPIRB is activated when it is in the water. The logic is that the boats sinks, and the EPIRB floats, sending a signal for help. I think I would opt for a more proactive rescue device, but that is all there was in those days.

The next option is the satellite emergency notification device, or the SEND. This is the most viable option for the majority of folks. With a SEND, you can communicate with friends and rescue operators via a text message. Some of these devices allow for continuous tracking so that your contacts back home know your whereabouts at all times.

SENDs rely on the satellite network of Iridium or Globalstar. This coverage is available worldwide. The SEND is usually cheaper than the PLB to purchase but requires a subscription to use the satellite network.

The two most popular devices are the Garmin InReach SE (formerly Delorme) and the SPOT Gen3. The advantage goes to the InReach because it allows for two-way communications via text, unlike the SPOT. Having contact with rescuers allows you to identify what type of help you need, such as mechanical or medical (or just plain lost). SAR teams prefer the two-way capabilities because it prevents false alarms and speeds up the whole process of helping the victim.

The downside of these units would be the ongoing cost of the subscription service and that you must have an unobstructed view of the sky to access a satellite. Thick tree cover, canyon walls and even being stuffed in a pack, can all obstruct the signal to the unit.

The last option we will discuss here is the satellite phone. This is my personal favorite for several reasons. A satellite phone will work worldwide (with the proper service provider). Like the SEND, they operate on a network of satellites and require an unobstructed view of the sky.

With a satellite phone, you can have direct voice communications with local rescue services or have the option to text. You must know the number of the nearest emergency service ahead of time and have it programmed into your phone. Not everywhere can you just call 911.

Iridium makes an extreme series that weighs around 9 ounces, has 8 hours of battery talk time and is fairly waterproof and bulletproof. Of the networks available, only Iridium has complete worldwide coverage, and works better than others in the mountains.

The bad news is that a new satellite phone will set you back $1,000 or more. The providers have an assortment of subscription plans covering lots of talk time or just emergency only. Generally, you are looking at a buck or more a minute, plus monthly access fees. Truly not for everyone, but they work well.

I use a satellite phone when I travel to places for a hunt that has no other communications. It is nice to call my wife and let her know I arrived safely and how the trip is going. You can rent satellite phones for these types of trips, and that is an option for the occasional traveler. If you use one for a couple trips, consider purchasing. Some companies offer used phones at reduced prices.

(Top) Dan Hiebert demonstrates the use of a SPOT locator in the high country. (Above) A SPOT is one way to get in touch with search-and-rescue workers during an emergency, although it may not be the best choice. (Submitted photos/ Dan Hiebert)

Most of the providers have plans for activating the phone during certain times of the year, when you will need it. If you don't use the phone over the winter months, you can turn off the service, saving money, and reactivate when necessary later in the season. Assess your own needs and the costs of service.

I carry the emergency-only type plan on mine. It has a basic subscription price and only has 10 minutes of talk time. If I go over the 10 minutes, it is a buck a minute. When I travel, I buy a prepaid card that gives me 200 minutes, valid for 60 days. It saves quite a bit of money that way.

Having any of these devices with you makes good sense. Getting in touch with emergency services when you need them can, and does save lives. Which device you use will depend on how often you need it, where you are going, and how high you are sitting on your wallet. It is a good feeling, knowing you can summon help when the erudite Mr. Murphy pays you a visit.

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