

Walking in circles

“Ancient legends of the sea, as any old salt will tell you, that when lost at sea, the victim is doomed to sail in circles, forever and ever, searching for a landmark. Beset on all

sides by strange creatures and evil monsters, the lost mariner searches and searches in the Sargasso Sea of Life,” Gene Shepard (from the book, “In God We Trust, All Others Must Pay Cash.”)

In countless searches for lost persons, usually during bad weather, we have found that folks really do walk in circles. Several times I have found myself walking in a circle when I was temporarily misguided (another word for lost). My wife of many years claims that I spend my life going in circles, never finding a landmark. Perhaps those long years of marriage could be the reason for the circling, but in the interest of marital bliss, I shall keep that thought to myself.

I recall a search for four lost hunters a couple years ago. They had left camp in the early afternoon on foot. Weather moved in, bringing 8 inches of heavy, wet snow in just a few hours. These hunters had no GPS or compass. They were using visible landmarks.

We started following their tracks around 10 that night. Our GPS showed we were about to close a circle when we happened upon them. The total distance they had covered in that circle was nearly 2 miles, but they were about to come upon their own tracks in the newly fallen snow.

It is too easy to blame this



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

phenomenon on good old Mr. Murphy as another one of his ploys to make a bad situation worse, but I think there may actually be a bit of science to this.

Jan Souman, a psychologist at the Max Planck Institute in Germany, conducted

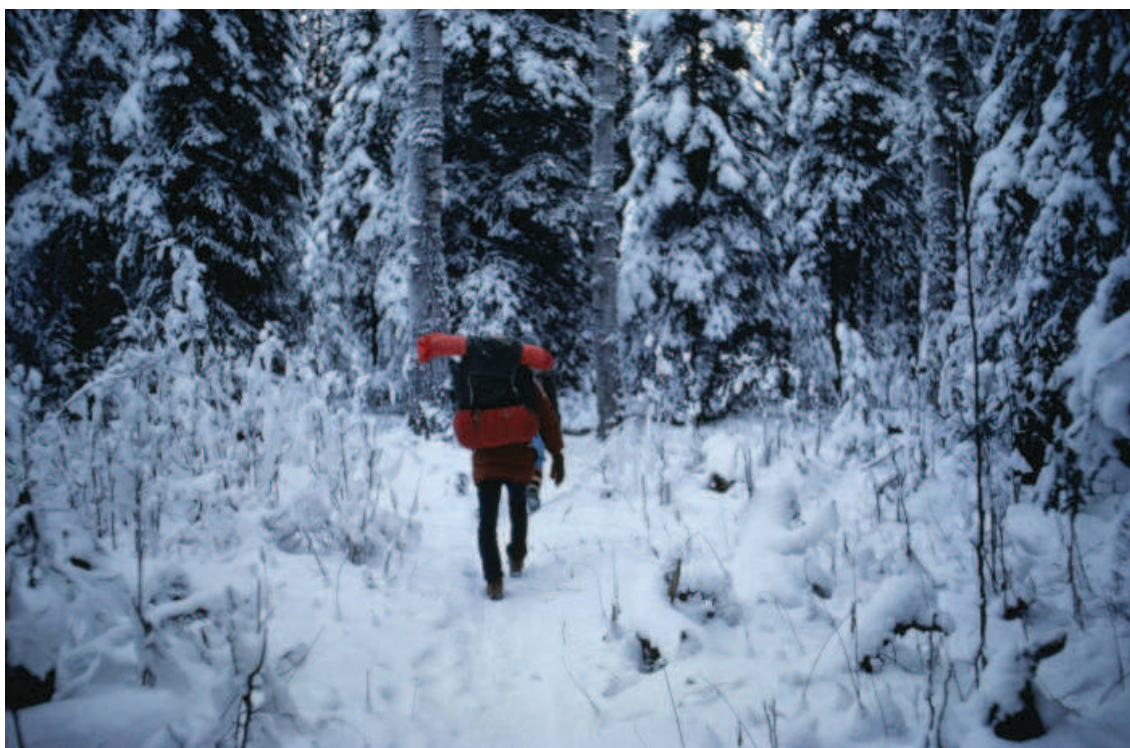
a study in 2007. Previously, researchers had suggested that walking in circles could result from subtle differences in the strength or length of the two legs that would bias a person to veer toward the left or right.

Souman’s experiments found that most subjects showed no strong bias for left or right turns, even though subjects did have small differences in the strength of their left and right legs. These differences did not correlate with their turning tendencies.

The findings did suggest to Souman that the reason people walk in circles involves the brain. When people are blindfolded, the brain has to plot a course for straight ahead, based on limited information, including input from the vestibular system, which informs the sense of balance and movement sensors in the muscles and joints.

According to Souman, those signals have small errors that can lead a person in a random, meandering path. Occasionally, the errors in a particular direction build up, leading us to walk in a circle.

Another theory is that we all have a dominant eye that misaligns to a focused point when both eyes are open. Being a past competition shotgun shooter, I have a fair amount of experience with dominant eye. I have little confidence in that theory because your



(Top) When heading into country that does not have lots of visible reference points, use your GPS and compass before you hit the trail. Remember, the secret to not getting lost is to stay found. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay) (Above) When the weather turns bad, visible landmarks can disappear, causing you to walk in circles. (Courtesy photo by CPW)

dominant eye will take over and lead the way, hence the term “dominant.”

We all have a tendency to edge away from environmental obstacles such as wind, slope of a hill, rain and sun in your face or a cliff. As humans, we will veer off course, taking the path of least resistance.

I think the biggest reason we circle is because of a lack of visual reference points. Our internal compass is not very accurate. When the sun is blazing down on you, it is near impossible to walk a straight line in open spaces, such as a desert or plains without one or two visual reference points. Human beings must have visual cues in order to navigate.

I have always said that it is always darkest, right before it turns completely black. Night falling can take away your visual references in a hurry. If it is a clear night, you can use a

bright star or the moon as a visual cue. Keep in mind the rotation of the earth, which will affect your direction of travel over the long haul of several hours.

Inclement weather, such as heavy rains or a snowstorm can cause your visual landmarks to vanish. The simplest solution is to use a compass or a GPS. Staying on a course using either of these instruments will keep you going straight.

If you have neither of these, it may be best to wait it out. When you must move in bad conditions, perhaps there is a noise you can use for a reference, such as a waterfall or river. Verify direction by cupping your hands around your ears and rotate your head horizontally. This will give to the direction of the highest sound intensity.

Knowing that you will not maintain a straight course

without an aid is half the battle. Plan your trip with a GPS and keep a compass as a backup. Then, even without visual references, you will still navigate your way out.

My wife says I just go in circles all the time, something about chasing my tail. I tried to explain that it is not circling, but “hovering,” waiting to move in. It is more of a tactical mindset, but she refuses to hear the explanation. If you happen to see me in the woods, going around in a circle, or hovering, just point me toward my truck.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

Are you looking for your next daily or recreational vehicle?

LOOK NO FURTHER!

Our automotive market place has all shapes and sizes of vehicles! Whether you're looking for a sedan or an RV, we can help.

DON'T MISS OUT ON YOUR NEXT DREAM CAR!

MONTROSE
DAILY PRESS

View our listings online at montrosepress.com/classifieds/vehicle