

Choices matter when soloing up high

The sudden, deep cracking sound from a tall fir tree above our heads got our attention in a big way.

A fourteen inch diameter spruce tree had blown down recently and was blocking our vehicle from driving the final half mile up to the start of the Horsethief Trailhead. These sudden very powerful winds on that recent Sunday morning had suddenly raised the stakes for three hikers, of which I was one.

The resounding crack we had just heard had not felled another tree just yet, but we realized that it could happen again, and any minute.

Saying goodbye, my two friends dropped me off for a planned seventeen mile, one-way solo run over the Bridge of Heaven and beyond. They quickly backed their vehicle into a turnaround, and headed to their own planned trailhead a mile downhill at Dexter Creek, while I went the other direction.

Earlier that morning I had been concerned about the prospect of being exposed above timberline in the “possible high winds” which had been forecast. As I began my run uphill, I now wanted to get above timberline as soon as possible, because traveling alone in tall trees in these winds seemed more risky than being high up and exposed fully.

For the first sixteen and a half miles, I encountered not a single person, nearby or distant. Only in the final half mile down the end of the trail to the highway did I come upon one hiker, and then two others.

During all of that time running alone, I considered the difference between a party of one traveling in the wilderness versus a party of two or more. Obviously, one person's injury mishap could present a day's hassle for their other buddy, but not be life-threatening.

But the exact same mishap (broken ankle, or brief loss of consciousness



Outdoors

By John T. Unger

from a head injury from a falling tree) would be immensely more life-threatening for a lone hiker or runner. Therefore, much more conservative decision making is the price that must be paid for experiencing many hours of the three hundred sixty degree unbroken vistas of mountain passes and extremes of weather and geography.

These days, carrying a “bike” bottle in each hand, a five to seven hour hike or run at high altitude can be done while carrying no more supplies and gear than can fit in a backpack that has no more volume than the interior of a football. But selecting the contents of that backpack becomes especially critical due to its low weight and small size.

Carefully chosen, a survival bundle of gear can roll up to the volume of the closed fist of a large man. This includes the usual items of compass, matches, and others of the “ten essentials”, which lists are widely detailed elsewhere. Very important are a water purification system and an emergency locator system via satellite. One simple version is sold as the Spot, while a more advanced two-way version is called the InReach.

Cellular phone service is absent in much of the backcountry, necessitating such a satellite phone, which can be as small as the interior volume of a deck of playing cards. In the accompanying photo, one version of that satellite phone with two-way communication function is the little red device laying on the belt pack.

Such a device not only can send an S.O.S. with a few pushes of the buttons, but also can allow back-and-forth texting with rescue personnel. But what if the solo outdoors person is unconscious from their mishap? By activating the tracking system at their journey's start, periodic waypoints (each five minutes or longer) are automatically transmitted and sent to any willing friend or family member.

The sage advice to “tell someone



Recent trends in mountain travel by foot are to prudently use surprisingly small loads, such as carrying only a backpack and its contents. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/John T. Unger)

where you are going and when you plan to be back” is supported by the use of such a digital device. A hiker unconscious with a head injury would then be identifiable as motionless (and possibly injured) by the lack of movement in the waypoints being transmitted to the cellphone of their townie friend. Better to be conscious and purposefully activating an S.O.S., of course.

Several recent regional tragedies have occurred with outdoor sports enthusiasts becoming injured, and not being found for several days, until it was too late.

So why bother with soloing in such big country?

As noted in the media coverage of

the recent celebration of “True Grit Days” in Ridgway, Hollywood movie-makers have repeatedly sought out stunning, roadless vistas in these San Juan Mountains as the settings for many important movies. The opportunity to experience such areas firsthand (and to come out the other side intact and energized) is worth some preparation, judgment, and focused choices.

John T. Unger is a Diplomat of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, with over twenty-five years of practice in Montrose. He cherishes the chance to spend hours putting one foot in front of the other on our surrounding mountain passes. Ideas for future columns are welcomed at sportsdocunger.com.

Sleep is an important survival tool

I am one of those people who is very regimented about getting enough sleep and keeping regular bedtime hours. I have been in a hunting camp, and just as the nighttime party gets rolling, my bedtime arrives and I disappear.

I have found that without my set amount of eight hours of sleep, I don't function at my best. When we are called out on an overnight search mission, it takes my body a couple days of normal sleep to fully recover. I might add, it was not always that way.

In my youth, I could work a duty all night, go fishing during the day, and catch a nap in the afternoon and return for a night shift. If I tried that today the results would definitely not be stellar.

After only three nights without sleep, you can begin to hallucinate. Some medical experts claim that a lack of sleep, between 17 and 22 hours, can have the same effect on the body as having an alcohol level of up to .08 percent, which is an illegal level of alcohol to operate a motor vehicle. Talk about a “drunken stupor.”

The longest recorded time a person has gone without sleep is 264 hours, or just over 11 consecutive days. It is not known exactly how long a



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

human can survive without sleep, and I don't want to be the one to find out.

Poor sleeping habits, like varying bedtimes, up too late or sleep in too long, are not to be confused with extreme sleep deprivation. Some people think they never get enough sleep. In a survival situation, the difference between survival and death could depend on sleep.

Symptoms of sleep deprivation include hallucinations, confusion, and loss of memory, headaches, irritability and a few others. Any of these symptoms will not play well for you during a full scale, 3-alarm survival situation. These symptoms compound the longer you go without sleep. The biggest problem of sleep deprivation and it's symptoms, is that you won't know it if you have it. When the symptoms kick in, it is probably too late.

We all have an internal clock that tells us when it

is time to sleep based on the position of the sun. It matters not whether the sun is visible or not. You could be in a room with no windows or clock, and your body still knows the cycle.

In an outdoor emergency, darkness brings its own set of worries along with it. Colder temperatures become a concern as night falls, and the worst element that tags along at night is worry. Concern and worry about your predicament and the unknown seem to magnify with the darkness. This alone can cause you to not be able to sleep.

Sometimes your not being able to sleep is because you are cold, or very uncomfortable. On a normal camping trip, I have had something like a misbehaving sock keep me annoyed and awake. Simpler things like these can and should be immediately remedied.

The fear of the unknown, along with seeking of warmth is one reason we, as humans, have a natural urge to seek shelter at night. Even with a shelter, our mind tells us that danger lurks in the dark and that worry, keeps folks awake.

If you are not getting sleep in a survival situation at night, you will probably be sleeping during the daytime.

See SLEEP page 9

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