

Going alone is a great way to enjoy the woods, but you better be well prepared, lest you wind up paying the full price plus tax. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

Going alone at it in the wilderness

There is a special spiritual awakening that one achieves when being alone in the great outdoors. It does not matter what your passion might be; hiking, fishing, hunting, camping, ATVing, all have a special rush when you tackle it by yourself.

I head into the outback alone for numerous reasons. Sometimes, a partner cancels at the last minute, while other activities are just more enjoyable by yourself. In the old days, it was because I was ditching school.

Take hiking, for instance. When hiking alone, you set the pace, stop when you want and view everything at your own pace. Short detours off the trail to investigate something can be accomplished without prior approval or notification to your partners. Going alone creates a great time to meditate, if you get into that sort of thing.

My wife says I have to go alone because nobody can stand to go with me. I pointed out that often times I have a hunting guide along on my trips. She retorted, "For a hundred bucks a day, guides can put up with anyone."

I realized there is no talking to her when she is in one of those moods, so I retreated to the woods for a long hike, by myself.

The buddy system, at the very least, is the safest way to recreate outdoors. When there are other participants, someone is available to, deliver first aid, summon help, discuss alternate routes, help maintain your course, help be alert for danger, and talk you out of doing something stupid.

The last one is something I need on a regular basis. For some reason, I live under the illusion that I am still in my 20s. My body keeps trying to tell me otherwise, but I never seem to get the message as I continue to commit mind boggling acts of idiocy.

Each year search and rescue people have missions to save people who have chosen to go it alone in the outdoors. These people were hunting, hiking, and riding an ATV or snow-mobiling. Some of these people suffered injuries while others just got lost. While there are dangers with anything we do outdoors, that danger increases when we are alone.

I do want to point out that one of the major attractions of an outdoor lifestyle is the ever-present element of danger. The presence of danger causes an adrenaline rush



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

that many of us seek. Just remember, sometimes the mountain wins, and the odds are not stacked in your favor, and you wind up in an aromatic pine box.

Injuries are the biggest problem. No matter how careful you are, an injury is a real possibility when doing anything outdoors. By yourself, you are more apt to attempt a trail that is to lose, jump a creek; try a hill you normally would not. All of these things can lead to an injury.

If you go it alone, you better have a plan to get help. You should also have some necessary first aid equipment to care for yourself until help arrives. I would recommend a class in advanced wilderness first aid for everyone.

Weather is always a concern, but more so when you are alone. You must have with you the extra clothes, supplies and skills to ride out any adverse weather conditions that may pop up. Thunderstorms and cold fronts seem to come out of nowhere in the mountains. While alone, be extra vigilant.

Animal attacks are rare but the chance increases when you are alone. Animals will avoid groups of people far more than a lone hiker. Personally, I am more afraid of an attack from a two-legged animal, especially if you are a female hiking alone. Seems that population is encroaching into our wilderness areas more and more, bringing with it the ever-present bad guys. In today's world, things like that are real possibilities.

When you run into someone on the trail, leave him or her with the impression that you are not alone. Let them think you have a partner who should be along any minute. Be polite to people you meet on the trail but don't be overly outgoing.

Another problem alone outdoor folk face is getting lost. You have no one with you to double-check your map reading or navigation skills. Here is a time when a GPS and the skills to use it really come in handy.

As I have always said, never rely completely on the GPS. Use the old-fashioned skills at the same time. A compass and landmarks will always get you home, if you keep track of them. The secret to not getting lost is to stay found.

Carry a cell phone with you when you go. Even if you are in an area of no service, a text message may still go out. If you need help, remember the saying, "Call when you can and text when you can't call." I carry a backup power supply with me and keep the phone off when not needed to conserve power.

Fish, hunt, ATV or hike only in areas that you are very familiar with, when heading out alone. Know all of the trails, water sources, and bailout points. Always stay on the trail and don't go cross-country. Make a detailed plan before you go and stick to that plan.

I like to go through a series of "what if" scenarios in my mind before a trip. Mentally going through an adversity, such as a sudden storm, helps me to prepare and be certain I have the necessary supplies with me to survive. Remember, you can't properly prepare unless you have given some thought about all the things that can go wrong.

Whenever you are in the backcountry, be sure you have someone back home who knows your plans and itinerary, including all the information about your vehicle and parking area. This is the person who will call for help in the event you are overdue. Any change you make in your plans should be immediately relayed to this contact person. This is even more important when you decide to hit it alone.

An important consideration when doing the solo thing is that you are never really alone. Somewhere behind you, just down the trail a way, is someone who came along on the trip. Murphy is back there, even if you don't see him, and he just can't wait to wreak havoc on your parade.

In the meantime, I am going to enjoy my hike alone. Maybe the wife will be in a better mood when I get back.

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MOUNTAIN

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The Colorado Mountains are known for thunderstorms in the warm summer months, usually in the afternoons. Lightning strikes occur more often at higher altitudes because the air and climate are drier. People outdoors should maintain an increased awareness for storms that produce lightning. According to the National Weather Service there are, on average, 20 million lightning strikes annually in the United States.

In 2016, one of the deadliest, if not most bizarre, lightning strikes took place in a private hunting area of the Hardangervidda mountain plateau in central-southern Norway. The area is a frigid landscape of streams, rocks, glaciers and alpine tundra, and also home to one of the largest reindeer herds in Europe.

The scene looked like something out of a zombie apocalypse movie, showing a treeless arctic landscape dotted with hundreds of reindeer corpses. According to the Norwegian Environmental Agency, 323 reindeer were killed by a single lightning strike, making it the deadliest massacre caused by lightning on record.

Because animals tend to bunch up together when bad weather is around, lightning strikes on animals is not entirely unusual. In 2016, 21 cows in South Dakota were killed when lightning struck the metal bale feeder where they were eating from.

In 1932, a flock of 52 wild geese in Canada were killed by a single strike. Scientist believe

the geese were done in by currents that run through the ground and not a direct strike. The locals reportedly gathered up the struck geese for a "wild goose dinner." I assume the geese were at least partially cooked.

Lightning can strike more than 10 miles away from the center of a thunderstorm, well beyond the audible range of thunder. Most bolts occur along the edges of the storm. Even though the storm is past your location, you are still in danger of a lightning strike.

In the event a storm catches you, here are a few things you can do to protect yourself:

- Avoid shelters with exposed openings such as picnic pavilions and camping shelters. Lightning can channel through the openings.
- Do not have close contact with the other members of your group. Spread out at least 50 feet apart to minimize the chance of everyone in the group being struck.
- Get away from water. Stay away from low spots that might accumulate rain runoff.
- Avoid a lone tree, or a small group of trees in the open at all costs. Also, stay away from any object that is higher than the surrounding terrain. A group of small trees among taller trees, or a thick forest, is a much better choice.
- Drop and move away from all metal objects such as trekking poles and pack frames. Stay far away from ATV's when in a storm.

Learn the lightning safety position as a last resort. Crouch down on the balls of your feet

while keeping them as close together as possible. Don't allow any other part of your body to touch the ground and keep your ears covered. By keeping the surface area of your body in contact with the ground to a minimum, the threat of electricity travelling across the ground and reaching you is greatly reduced. This position should only be used as a last resort. It's probably a good idea at this point to try and remember the words to the Hail Mary too.

The next morning on that fateful camping trip found us boys sorting through the wreckage of what was our happy campsite the evening before. We gathered up our wet sleeping bags, clothes, tent and soggy food, and began our descent down to the rendezvous point with my grandfather.

We were cold, wet, hungry and tired, but a little bit smarter and with a great deal of respect for lightning and the mountain. Whenever you challenge the mountain, in monte semper vincit, the mountain always wins.

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I took this photo of a lightning strike while I was on safari in Argentina. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

News tip or story idea?

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