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Survival of the fittest

Regular readers of my column know that I often make light of dumb things people do in the woods, simply because it is near impossible for me to understand these people walk among us.

I use the episode of these people as an illustration of what they did wrong so we can learn to do it right.

A mistake in the back-country can be a punched ticket on the bus heading down the road to perdition. Mistakes happen. Bad judgment, inclement weather, injuries, damaged equipment, and hunger can lead to bad decisions.

There are, however, times when someone makes a decision that is nothing more than a blinding act of idiocy.

Take for example the case of a pair of hikers from Texas, who decided to take a road trip to Colorado. It was early summer of 2022, and these two folks decided they needed a break from the incredible heat and humidity of their home state. They did do a little research as to where they wanted to go in Colorado before they left.

The area they selected was near Blanca, Colorado, at Lake Como, which is deep in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness. Our two hikers had very little experience camping and backpacking, and no experience hiking on serious mountain trails.

They decided to skip all that beginner stuff, and jump right into the expert class, obtaining a fast-track education on the way.

The thing to know about Lake Como, is that it is reached by a rugged trail that is 8.3 miles out-and-back. It is considered by experts as a “challenging” route, taking experienced hikers five and a half hours to complete, if they don’t



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

dawdle. Very modified 4WD vehicles also climb this trail, but some folks prefer to hike it. Our pair chose to hike up the trail and carry their camp gear with them.

On the trip in, our hikers never reached the lake. The pair got tired and decided to camp a quarter mile from the lake. The weather was chilly and very rainy, as the monsoon moisture was making itself well known in the high-country.

Apparently, several search and rescue folks, who were not on duty at the time, came across the campsite of the pair. They noticed the camp was not set up for the rain.

The tent had no weather fly, and the pair had no cold weather clothing or rain gear. The off-duty rescue folks offered to help the guys hike back down to their vehicle. The hikers declined assistance.

At 2:30 a.m. the cold and rain had taken the toll of the pair. They began experiencing hypothermia. One of them had a severe headache (possibly altitude sickness) and the other was vomiting.

By a stroke of luck, they were able to find cell service, and place a call for help, saying they were cold and sick. The call went out to activate the Alamosa Search and Rescue team, who respond-

ed immediately.

Two truck teams were sent into the field for the search and rescue mission, despite the dangerous conditions on the already treacherous mountain 4WD road/trail. Due to heavy rain, there was a high chance of rockfall, and the route was extremely slippery.

Keep in mind, areas of this trail are inches away from a 1,000-foot drop into the abyss. Add to that, the rescue took place at night, with darkness adding another challenge to the already hairy mission. (As an aside, it seems all the hairy missions occur at night.)

Search and rescue crews eventually found their way to the victims with their vehicles and equipment. Both victims were extremely cold and unable to move, and the male victim was severely dehydrated and vomiting.

The victims were given hot water bottles to warm them up, and drinks for their dehydration, while they were driven down the mountain with the rescue team.

It was a great job by the Alamosa team, as they safely brought the team and victims out of the field by 8:22 a.m. That team deserves a lifesaving award as far as I am concerned.

The long list of mistakes almost sounds like a cartoon comic in the Sunday paper. The couple did not check the forecast before they left. They had no idea Colorado had a rainy season.

The pair was surprised to find Colorado so cold and wet, when it was so hot and humid in Texas when they left. They actually said that.

Our Texas hikers did not have any means of staying dry, no rain gear, extra clothes, not even a rain-fly for the tent. They did not have anywhere near



Makin a mistake in the outdoors can leave you with an injury, or worse. (Mark Rackay/ Special to the MDP)

enough food or drink.

Most notably, the pair declined assistance from search and rescue team members that happened to be on the Lake Como trail earlier in the day. The team noted the pair was struggling and unprepared at that time.

This rescue was a prime example of how ignorance and denial can lead to catastrophe, injury, and even a train ticket on the last train west. To say this pair got lucky is an understatement.

If not for the superb response from Alamosa search and rescue, the Texas hikers would have left their creditors in a terrible place.

Survival of the fittest, a term made famous in the fifth edition of On the

Origin of Species by Charles Darwin, which suggested that organisms best adjusted to their environment are the most successful in surviving and reproducing.

Darwin did not consider the process of evolution as the survival of the fittest; he regarded it as the survival of the fitter, because the struggle for existence and survival is relative and thus not absolute.

Of Darwin did not take into consideration the element of luck, and luck is what saved these hikers. I have always said I would rather be lucky than good, but maybe there is room for both.

Before you head out for a hike, make sure you check the weather, bring extra clothes, food, water,

and have a plan. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best. Remember, being well prepared is the secret to completing the trip in a favorable way.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world 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 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

How do trails get that way?

Does high-altitude trail crew work provide an intense enough workout to be effective training for mountain races?

For the umpteenth time, my summer weekends are being planned around training for the Imogene Pass Run coming up in early September.

Wanting to get hours of high-altitude foot travel with plenty of elevation gain and loss, I also have been looking forward to volunteering this summer to help do trail maintenance on the many trails our area offers hikers, horse packers, and runners.

Of course, the running and training does sort of serve as a convenient excuse just to be self-propelled through the beautiful wilderness areas which are less than an hour’s drive from downtown

Outdoors

By John T. Unger

Montrose.

When I volunteered for a two day Ouray Trail Group (OTG) work shift, my first, it was scheduled to take place on the Blue Lakes Pass trail and near Wright’s Lake, in Yankee Boy Basin on the approach to Mt. Sneffels. That sounded good to me, and I looked forward to it.

In fact, I am still looking forward to it, because in the few days leading up to our weekend of work, the OTG scout had found that those two trails were still buried under so much snow that the trail could not be worked on yet, in mid-July.

Not a bad problem to have. And there are plenty of other spectacular trails

around here that have a cyclical need for erosion control, fallen tree removal, edge stabilization, and more.

So instead of that work weekend occurring in the Mt. Sneffels wilderness, our group was reassigned to two other trails, including one in the Uncompahgre wilderness.

Again, that is surely not a bad gig at all.

Benefits exist when working under leaders with experience and certifications in sawyering, trail maintenance skills, trail crew leadership, CPR, and first aid.

Rich and Rebecca were such leaders, and as we began our first day by hiking two miles up the Hayden Trail from the north approach, their skills paid dividends.

See TRAILS page A10



Under the shade of an old-growth ponderosa pine tree more than eleven feet in circumference, crew leaders Rich and Rebecca of Ouray Trail Group give a review of trail tool safety during our workday. (John Unger/ Special to the MDP)