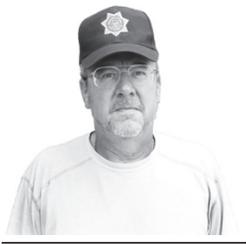


When Search and Rescue is pushed to the limit



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Anyone who writes must also read. Author Stephen King once said, "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time or the tools to write. Simple as that."

Reading allows you to witness the possibilities of the craft. I read for research, and to accumulate knowledge about what has been done and how it was done. I also enjoy and respect the classics, especially those related to the outdoors.

Whenever I am kicked back reading, my wife of many years will pad into the room, offering suggestions of more useful things I could be doing. I have a few counter suggestions I could offer, but in the interest of marital bliss, I remain silent, something I am not particularly known for.

One of the things I read about recently was a search and rescue mission that occurred over a two-day period at Lake Mead National Recreation Area. One hiker died and 33 others required rescue amidst extremely hot temperatures. The deceased

hiker paid the full price, plus tax, when he experienced a heat-related illness at temperatures that soared above 100 degrees. The search team also evacuated five of the hiker's companions.

The following day, a group of 28 hikers from a small private school called for a rescue, along the same trail where the hiker passed the day before. The group consisted of 3 adults and 25 children with special needs, and the group was woefully unprepared for the heat.

Park rangers gave the group citations for creating a hazardous condition and hiking without a large group permit. The Park Service immediately closed the trail, and a couple others in the area, until the temperatures came back to a reasonable point. They probably closed to give their staff a rest.

We had a mission a couple years ago, that involved a party of four unprepared hikers who went down the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. One hiker broke an ankle and needed evacuation. This mission involved two Montrose deputies, two Olathe police officers, seven members of Olathe Fire, one fellow citizen with several horses, and a dozen members of the Montrose Sheriff's Posse.

That day, the temperature was just above the century mark. Over the course of about nine hours, the injured man, and three companions were brought up, all suffering from heat illnesses. When the four



The challenge coin for the Sheriff's Posse says, "Until they are home, we will not rest." (Photo/Mark Rackay)

were loaded into air-conditioned vehicles, filled up with IV fluids, and left the scene, it was time to take care of the responders.

At least four of them suffered from the heat illness and needed IV assistance. When the folks are physically exerting themselves, carrying equipment up and down the canyon under treacherous and scorching conditions, a couple bottles of Gatorade just won't cut it. I cannot possibly imagine what the Arizona SAR team went through rescuing 28 people. We had 24 folks for four victims and were stretched pretty thin.

The thing to remember about search and rescue teams in Colorado, and many other states, is they are required by law to be volunteers. That means every one of them does this on their own time, and usually with their own money. These folks all have jobs, lives, families, spouses, mortgages, bills, taxes, the "full catastrophe" according to Zorba the Greek.

SAR members have a passion for helping people in need in the great out-

doors. Their teams require the assistance of the public, in the form of donations, to exist. All members have to provide much of their own equipment, and we all know that outdoor equipment isn't cheap. A decent pair of hiking boots will push 300 bucks these days, and good packs closer to 400. Many use their own vehicles and ATVs. And all that equipment needs to be maintained.

Also consider the time away from family and work. Many missions will run day and night for days, even weeks in some circumstances. It takes a very understanding boss to go along with that, and an understanding spouse. Then there is the training. Most members will spend more time training than being on actual missions.

I read about a ranger team in New York that works in the Adirondacks and Catskills, and their mission count. From 2012 to 2022, state rangers found and rescued more than 5,400 people. That boils down to over 300 missions a year, almost one a day. The team works 24/7 to keep up with it. Talk about on-the-job training.

One particular trail travels 16.2 miles, leading to the tallest peak in New York, where it intersects with trails

to other peaks. The majority of rescues occur along this very rugged trail, where most of the rescues are performed on foot. Their longest mission ever, was for 578 days, searching for a missing 25-year-old man.

Some of the search and rescue teams have more members, especially those around big cities. The larger teams can organize specialty teams within their membership. There can be a marine/boat unit, swift-water team, ATV team, K-9 team, rope team, tactical team, foot team, climbing team, and many others if there enough people. This really helps share the load when you can break it out, calling out the teams specifically needed for the mission at hand.

The local teams here in Montrose and Delta County don't have the number of members to call on. Montrose County Sheriff's Posse has around 20 members on the East End, and about that many on the West End. The numbers for Delta County Search and Rescue are similar.

When the numbers are small, each member has to train in several disciplines. When a mission requires a foot team, ATV team, and a tactical team, you will probably see the same smiling faces. Our saving grace is the smaller locales don't get the number of missions a populated area like New York sees.

We also have what is called Agency Assist. Many times, SAR teams from area counties will come and assist other SAR teams in need. Delta, Mesa, Gunnison, Ouray, San Miguel, and Montrose, has all had many joint missions over the years. We all could not ac-

complish our goals without all of us helping each other.

I have met search and rescue people around the world as I travel and always take time to talk with them. The one universal bond I have found is dedication. This group is collectively, the most dedicated and passionate about their job as any group I have ever seen, and we are very fortunate they are there.

You will see tired and worn-out SAR members after a mission, but you won't see them complain. They love a happy outcome, but know that as each mission drags on, the chance of a safe return for the missing person decreases. That's why they stay and keep searching. The Montrose County Sheriff's Posse has a challenge coin that says it all, "Until they are home, we will not rest."

In the interest of marital bliss and mutual compromise, I don't lay around and read in front of my wife anymore, especially while she is working. Instead, I now have several hiding places to go to. God Bless SAR teams everywhere.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for The Nautical Mile, and other 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. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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The coalition was officially established last year, after receiving a planning grant from the state in 2024 to develop a Generation Wild application. (Courtesy Photo/Generation Wild of the Uncompahgre)

GENERATION

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few final events included rafting and via ferrata trips that helped families get outside and staff continue outreach efforts regarding what participants want to see from Generation Wild.

Now, they're gearing up to start executing.

On the Horizon

One of the first offerings will be an Outdoor After School Program at Outer Range for 1st to 5th graders.

The program will run Monday through Thursday from 3 to 6 p.m. during the school district's fourth quarter starting March 23. It will be administered by MRD staff, and have space for around two dozen students.

Ball said the group hasn't solidified details of the curriculum, but it will include a mix of outdoor games and skills, conservation and education components and unstructured play time.

Registration is live on the district's website, and while tuition for the quarter costs \$275, financial aid will be available.

"Our goal is to make sure no one is turned away for lack of ability to pay," he said.

A handful of camping events, for kids and families with varying camping experience, are also planned for later in the spring. And, Friends of Youth and Nature and the Montrose County School District have a few of their own Generation Wild-funded activities coming up, such as a snowshoeing outing and year-end capstone trip for Black Canyon High School students.

On the administrative end, the coalition is also hiring two grant-funded staff members to help support the MRD and its partners in planning and implementing programming. And, the group has already convened a Community Leadership Council made up of kids, young adults and parents to gain regular input from the people the coalition aims to serve.

"It's a pretty diverse slice of the community," Ball said, adding he's been continually impressed by the work of the local groups and residents throughout this entire process.

"We're very pleased and thankful," he said.



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