

Winter storm survival



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

How do you survive a snowstorm when you are in the woods? Easy, just don't get caught in one. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Murphy, of Murphy's Law fame will take a hand in the proceedings.

Even if you have done your homework on winter survival studies, packed some necessary gear, and checked the forecast, you can still get caught. Remember, no matter what the weather service claims about accuracy, they are wrong more often than they will ever admit. Weather guessers is too kind of a word for them, and yes, I have heard all the excuses.

It started out as a nice weekend for a winter hike, or a late season hunting trip. You forgot, Murphy lurks everywhere. He took your gloves out of your pack while you were sleeping. He left your flashlight on, so the batteries are dead, and he put salt in the sugar container. This morning, he left your truck headlights on, so you will be greeted with a dead battery when you come out Sunday evening. Murphy is probably a close relative of someone who doesn't like you. You sure don't want to trust him with the weather forecast.

Getting caught off guard can happen to any of us, and if you have spent enough time in the woods, you are probably a veteran. I know I sure am. Weather grows more and more unpredictable, and getting stuck is just a matter of time. The secret to surviving is to be prepared for the worst.



Before you head for the hills in winter, make sure you and your vehicle are prepared in case something goes wrong. Tennis shoes, light jackets, no gloves, food or water, will lead to a rescue like this one here. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

The dangerous storm is the one that comes on full blast. Some snowstorms start slow, cloud up, wind increase, flurries, enough to give you time to beat feet back to the truck. When they come on full bore, whiteout and winds together, batten down the hatches because it is about to get busy.

When it happens, don't panic. Remember, it's just snow, the stuff that got you out of that loathsome childhood affliction known as school. A snow day that was too rough to walk to school, but not too rough to build a snow fort and have a snowball fight. Just stop for a moment and evaluate your situation.

The trailhead might be just two miles ahead, but if you can't see two yards, you probably don't want to keep going. Stop and prioritize survival, especially if it is getting dark. Use whatever daylight is left to find a place to settle in for the night. Dark brings even less visibility and the coldest temperatures.

If you have that emergen-

cy bivy or a good tarp, find the place to set up shelter. You must protect yourself from the elements and stay warm and dry. If you get wet, your chances of survival diminish as quickly as easy credit.

I like to find a cluster of thick spruce trees to set up in. A blown over tree with plenty of boughs and branches still attached will work also. Anything to get you out of the elements and protect you from the wind. Remember, warm and dry.

Always have some dry clothing in your pack. An extra set of dry gloves, a watch type hat, and a warm extra jacket, hopefully with Gore-Tex, to also help keep you dry, will do the trick. Save the dry clothes for when you have the shelter up and a fire going.

Yes, fire. Even in a snowstorm, a fire can make or break the deal. A roaring fire is a primal thing that makes you feel safe and secure. Find dry firewood, not on the ground, but dead wood still in the trees. Plenty of Firestarter,

and multiple methods of ignition, like windproof/waterproof matches, a lighter, and perhaps a road flare. Fire building skills are something you should practice and practice, so when it turns bad, it is just automatic.

Get something between you and the ground. I don't carry a foam mattress in my pack, but nature provides something that will work. Pine boughs piled up a foot or two high make a nice bed in a pinch. If you are just going to sit, your backpack will do a fair job of keeping your underside dry.

A night like this will pass much easier if you have a full belly. You probably have all kinds of snacks, power bars, and trail mix that will help. For late season trips, I like to bring along an MRE. These self-contained meals have all kinds of good stuff in them, including their own cooking system. An MRE can just about last forever, doesn't care if it is below freezing, and has plenty of calories. Makes a nice

meal in a pinch, with some leftovers, like peanut butter and crackers, for breakfast. Stuff an MRE in the bottom of your winter pack.

Hydration is a concern, even when it is cold. You can use the campfire to melt snow, never eat snow as it can promote hypothermia. Melting snow, and warming the water up is better, and won't drain your energy. If you are short on food, the water will trick your body, and you won't feel as hungry because your belly is full of fluids.

As with anything else, a positive mental outlook is everything. It's just snow, the same stuff I always got in trouble with because I threw snowballs at cars (yea, I was one of those kids). In any survival situation, the worst thing you can do is dwell on it. Keep yourself busy making your snow fort, building a fire, and a nice bed out of pine boughs, and organizing your gear.

Before you know it, the storm will be over. Most snowstorms are pretty well cleared out within 24

hours, and many less than that. I got caught once on an elk hunt, when the snow came on suddenly late in the afternoon. I spent the night behind a blown down spruce tree in a little winter fort I built. The next morning, I awoke to clear skies over a foot of snow and continued on with my hike back to the truck, no worse for wear. By 9 a.m. I was back in town having a huge breakfast, all because I was prepared for once.

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Colorado Parks and Wildlife opens applications for 2026 range riding season

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

Denver – Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) is expanding the Colorado Range Riding program and has opened Requests for Proposals (RFP) for the 2026 season through the Colorado Vendor Self Service. These RFPs will be open through February 6, 2026, with interviews occurring later that month and contracts awarded in early spring.

In 2025, the Colorado Range Riding program contracted 11 riders and focused on northwest Colorado. With continued wolf dispersal, CPW is hoping to expand the program into the southwest and increase the number of contracted riders.

Contracted riders will start in April and attend training facilitated by CPW and the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA), a partner in the Colorado Range Riding program. This training was coproduced with veteran riders and livestock

producers from across the west, who bring decades of experience managing wolf-livestock conflict and builds on applicant's knowledge of:

- Wildlife track and sign,
- Best range riding practices,
- Important tools and technology,
- And livestock monitoring techniques.

Range riders contracted through the program are expected to perform their duties primarily in the county they are initially assigned, but work areas are subject to change based on need and ecological activity.

A Hybrid info session will take place on Friday January 16 at 10 a.m. Interested applicants can either join in person at the CPW Grand Junction Office in the Hunter Education Building or online.

Individuals interested in applying for range riding positions must register on the Vendor Self Service in order to download RFP docu-



In 2025, the Colorado Range Riding program contracted 11 riders and focused on northwest Colorado. With continued wolf dispersal, CPW is hoping to expand the program into the southwest and increase the number of contracted riders. (Courtesy photo/CPW)

ments and information.

More information about these positions and application materials can be found by going to cpw.info/3LxTIIG, clicking on "View Published Solicitations," searching for "range rider" and clicking on the hyperlinked solicitation number.

About the Colorado Range Riding Program

The Colorado Range Riding program was established in 2025 as part of CPW and CDA collab-

orative effort to respond to developing producer needs. This program is the first of its kind in Colorado and builds off experience from other states, producers, agencies, and programs that have navigated wolf-livestock conflict.

Trained to support livestock producers, range riders contracted through the Colorado Range Riding program — in addition to two Non-Lethal Mitigation Specialists

employed by CDA — are a crucial piece of the CPW and CDA's conflict minimization program. By actively assessing and communicating potential for wolf-livestock conflict, range riders empower CPW and CDA to take action to reduce the predation risk to livestock herds.

"Range riders provide critical monitoring of wildlife and livestock behavior and activity to help inform effective decision making related to wolf-livestock conflict," said Rae Nickerson, wolf damage and conflict minimization manager. "Riders improve communication between producers, between producers and agency staff, and between different sectors of CPW."

Range riders are eyes and ears on the landscape, collecting important information for producers, wildlife managers, and biologists alike. In addition to providing human presence that can deter conflict, riders collect data that allows CPW and

CDA to determine best approaches for addressing conflict through adaptive, coordinated plans.

"Range riders are often considered a nonlethal tool/approach, but I like to think of riders as pattern and information experts," Nickerson said. "Their collection and communication of important information allows us to work with producers to find viable, reasonable, and effective responses to the risk of wolf-livestock conflict. In terms of our program, riders are tasked with knowing the behavior and activity of livestock and wildlife and how it changes over time so they can notice a potential or existing conflict while there's still time to take action."

Applications for the Colorado Range Riding program positions will be open through February 6, 2026. Additional information and applications can be found through the Colorado Vendor Self Service.