

Safety, Safety, Safety

by
Larry Robinson

Oh, brother, that again!

Yes, again. And the reason for that is multi-faceted, but largely revolves around the fact that 1) our human nature causes us to quickly get complacent about things that we feel are quasi-necessary, & 2) as I have often said, “a self-analysis is the most inaccurate inventory possible.” Sadly we almost never seem to underestimate our capabilities, but more often overestimate. And therein lies the rub. When we start with an exaggerated confidence in our capabilities, and complacency causes us to leave home part of our safety gear because, ‘well, we’ve never used that anyway’, this is a setup for the cascading effect that leads to a survival situation. Most rescue situations did not develop from one single catastrophic event, but were a result of a domino effect of a number of small occurrences that built on each other. This is compounded by the fact that the line between survival/not survival is much thinner out there, and gets thinner with distance away from the trailhead.

And if you are a goatpacker, you are also responsible for the little lives that are carrying your ‘stuff’. And they can go into crisis very quickly. Having had two guys that got poisoned out in the woods definitely underscored that issue for me with great emphasis. Case in point: On my very last venture into the woods, in August, where in Idaho we almost always have unadulterated sun continuing into September, we ran into rain, wind and very cold temperatures. The morning we departed it was 28 degrees. Unseasonable? To be sure! Interestingly, before we left, my wife asked if I was going to take my long johns. In classic male fashion, I responded, “In August? Who needs long johns in August?” Well, I did. We froze our rears off for about 3 days. We even had to take refuge from a rainsquall under a tree at one point on the way in. And it was downhill from there. Since I do carry a real good sleeping bag, I did have a refuge, but that meant that there were some early-to-bed nights on this trip. There is nothing like rain and wind to suck the very life out of you, and an incident like this can go downhill very quickly.

In order to enhance safety, and minimize surprises, one thing I religiously do before leaving for a trip is print out my checklist (don’t leave home without one!) and check everything off one by one, assembling all my gear in one place in the living room. That precaution helps to limit the loss covered by my saying that ‘it isn’t whether or not you are going to forget something, only what it is, and how important’.

Another very important safety issue is to recognize you, and/or your partner’s limitations. On our recent hike, my plan called for an exploration of the lakes in a particular basin, then a climb to the top of the cirque they were sitting in, then a descent down the other side of the cirque to another basin. After we fought our way to the top of this precipice, it was obvious that it was very dicey climb down into the next drainage. I felt I could handle it, but my partner was none to sure. At some point in our conversation she made the statement, “Just looking down there frightens me!” That was my cue to say, “Well, plan ‘B’ time.” If she was frightened from the beginning, and therefore very tense, trying to climb down what was admittedly a very challenging drainage, it was time to rethink the venture. It is never happy to have to depart from a well-laid plan, but depart we did. I told her, “Let’s go back to the truck, drive to the Josephus Lake trailhead, and start out from there.” And so we did. By doing this, we missed much of what I had originally planned. Bummer. But while we were still driving to the other trailhead I was contemplating another trip that would take in the rest of the lakes. And that we will do, probably next year.

And finally, it DOES NOT make you more of a ‘woodsman’ to not take advantage of the various electronic enhancements to safety that have been developed in the last decade or so. I generally don’t use a GPS for navigation, as I don’t feel I need it. But it IS good for cross-checking my position. Last year, if I had not done that, I would have put myself and my hiking partner in a very tenuous position. It meant a bit of backtracking, but it was good to find out about my error early on before it was difficult to recover from it. The second device that I have been carrying is a PLB. My wife made me buy one these several years ago right after they became available due to the fact that I was hiking alone. The PLB if you set it off tells rescuers who you are, where you are, and that you are in a life-threatening situation. It is a one-trick pony, but if you need it, it will have been worth the expense and having carried it for all these years (the type I carry is here: http://www.equipped.com/terrafix_406gps_plb.htm).

The third device I have been made to acquire by my ‘significant other’ is a SPOT. I can’t for the life of me remember what ‘SPOT’ stands for, but what it does is send messages, via satellite, letting the homebodies know where you are and that you are still OK. It will also call for help if you need it, and finally it duplicates the PLB function of a 911 call. The SPOT is \$170 initially (on sale now for \$99), and \$100 a year for the satellite coverage. A bargain I think. Don’t leave home without it (SPOT Website: <http://www.findmespot.com/en/>).

Will all of this guarantee that you will never have any troubles out in the woods? Hardly. But in a lot of years of hiking, the worst that has ever happened to me is that I had to hike out about 6 miles soaking wet. After that I upgraded my equipment in order to minimize that possibility reoccurring. Finally, carrying the rescue beacons gives one a sense of coverage should the unpredictable and unexpected actually happen.

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