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## Letters

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# Letters

## Lessons from 219 Mountain Deaths

Thank you for reviewing my book, *Death in the White Mountains: Hiker Fatalities and How to Avoid Being One*, in your Summer/Fall 2018 issue. The reviewer, Steve Fagin, misrepresented the purpose of the book. He wrote that the book “delivers, as promised, an abundance of death but falls somewhat shorter regarding advice on avoiding fatality. In fairness, though, what can you say beyond, ‘Don’t get too close to the edge,’ or ‘Make sure you have plenty of warm clothing.’”

The point of my book was not to chronicle hundreds of deaths, as Fagin suggested, but to find out what can be learned by studying White Mountain fatalities. Using many sources, including *Appalachia*, I compiled a list of 219 hikers who have died in the region. I classified the victims according to cause of death and examined all the deaths in each category to discover common factors. The results were instructive. For example, I learned that all 46 hypothermia deaths were associated with three fatal errors. The most frequent error was a lack of preparation. Thirty-four of 46 victims were unprepared for the weather conditions. For summer hikers this usually meant not having warm clothing and for winter hikers not having the necessary gear for an unexpected overnight. The other fatal errors were failing to turn around when the weather deteriorated (29 of 46) and hiking alone (24 of 46).

My book offers plenty of advice on “avoiding fatality.” Each of the first nine chapters is devoted to a cause of death and includes extensive analysis of common mistakes. At the end of each chapter, I offer safety suggestions, and the final chapter distills these suggestions into six key lessons.

A great deal can be said beyond, “Don’t get too close to the edge.” In writing about falling deaths, I stress such matters as the wisdom of starting a hike early so you’re not caught on the trail in darkness. I discuss the importance of going up and down the same trail in winter so you can see icy areas and other hazards. I also describe the danger of climbing Mount Washington when the summit cone is encrusted with ice. How many people are aware that at such times the mountain can be unsafe for well-equipped winter hikers? It becomes the province of skilled mountaineers with rope and an anchoring system.

In analyzing the 219 fatal accidents, my goal was to prevent future loss of life.

—Julie Boardman, *New London, New Hampshire*