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Accidents

*Analysis from the White Mountains of
New Hampshire and occasionally elsewhere*



THE DRY, TEMPERATE SUMMER PAST FOUND ME INDOORS AND OUT OF the hills a good deal more than I like to be—a book project (*Critical Hours: Search and Rescue in the White Mountains*, University Press of New England, 2018) and other responsibilities saw to that—and, when I got out and about, it was on local, coastal trails, or on the trackless sea. So my mountains were often those of memory, with some small mountain running and walking on the sharp and stony paths of Connecticut's Sleeping Giant and New Hampshire's midstate Cardigan valley interspersed. When reports of White Mountain trouble filtered in, I relied on that memory to see the trail or brook or uptick of land where they took place. In that way, I still returned to the Whites often.

There, the cool, dry summer encouraged the usual, expansive turn toward the trails. The days of long light and dry rock ask us into the hills. That those milder days arrive first in the lowlands and later in the uplands often brings us stories of two seasons in late spring's shoulder season. That was true as 2017's days grew longer and spring purred forth, carrying with it this column's two significant search-and-rescue stories.

School Is Out

Two Calls from Lafayette. June promises summer, and, whatever our age, we feel a fillip of excitement as the school year comes to a close. It doesn't take much to imagine the current of freedom that ran through the Achigan School group as they approached a year-end day hike of the Falling Waters Trail–Old Bridle Path loop over the Franconia Ridge on June 3.

Having driven down from L'Achigan, Quebec, the 47 students and 7 adult chaperones from the secondary school must have developed a kind of momentum when they arrived at the trailhead. How else to explain their decision to ignore advice from trail stewards in the parking area and climb away into a day that featured cold rain and gusty winds? The nearby Mount Washington Observatory reported an average temperature of 31 degrees (11 below normal), 40-MPH winds from the northwest (with a top gust of 70), with more than a half-inch of liquid precipitation in addition to an inch of snow and ice on June 3. By the time the school group neared and crossed Lafayette's summit around 2 P.M., they were spread out along the route, and four of the teens, carrying

A thunderstorm retreats from the exposed Franconia Ridge. SANDY STOTT

minimal gear and supplies and hiking in the fog without any adults, missed the turnoff for the Greenleaf Trail, continuing straight onto the Garfield Ridge Trail. By the time they ran into some other hikers who turned them around, they had slipped to last in their group. Experienced readers of this column can surmise what comes next.

At 7:30 P.M. two calls for help issued from the thick, wet, oncoming night. First, New Hampshire Fish and Game learned from the Appalachian Mountain Club that a 36-year-old woman was having extended trouble descending the Old Bridle Path from Greenleaf Hut. Michelle M. had covered only a mile in eight hours since leaving the hut. A 911 call also reported that the group of four girls from the Achigan School was missing somewhere on the Mount Lafayette slopes. I'll separate the two incidents here while also offering a reminder that NHFG's Lt. Jim Kneeland was working the phones to understand and to summon responses for both.

Michelle's dilemma turned out to be a simple (albeit elongated) one in both genesis and resolution. On the evening of June 2 at around 10 P.M., she had departed with a group of coworkers for a night hike up the Falling Waters Trail to see the sunrise from the ridge above. Then, the group planned to cross the Franconia Ridge and descend via the Old Bridle Path. Both Michelle and her husband (who was not on the climb initially) felt iffy about the demanding climb, but Michelle's work friends persuaded her to go.

By 11 A.M. on the 3rd, the group had reached Greenleaf Hut, where they paused for a break before beginning their descent of the Old Bridle Path at 11:30 A.M. During that break, Michelle called her husband and told him that she was very tired and would be descending slowly. She began making her way down with a coworker, while the rest of the group moved on ahead. At some point, Michelle's coworker injured his back and felt he should get down more quickly; he left Michelle alone on the trail.

When he'd not heard from his wife by 4:30 P.M., Michelle's husband, Michael, drove from southern New Hampshire to the trailhead and began climbing to find her at about 6 P.M.

After the 7:30 P.M. call, Kneeland had been trying unsuccessfully to make contact with Michelle and her husband via phone, but just after 9 P.M., he reached Michelle's husband, who had just met her on the trail. Michelle's husband asked Kneeland for some assistance getting Michelle down the final stretch of trail, and Kneeland sent Conservation Officer Robert Mancini up to help. Mancini arrived at 9:45 P.M., gave Michelle some fluids and warm

clothing, and then began guiding her down. The three got to the parking area at 12:45 A.M.

Comment: This incident brings to mind again Ty Gagne's assertion in the last issue ("Weakness in Numbers," Winter/Spring 2018) that sometimes there can be weakness in numbers when we go hiking. Our tendency to respond to peer pressure, to listen to others' voices instead of our own, can lead us to try what we wouldn't on our own. Surely that happened for Michelle when she was persuaded by coworkers to try one of the Whites' most demanding routes when she didn't feel prepared for its challenge. That this attempt would be an overnight hike simply compounded its demands.

That weakness in numbers grows even more prominent when Michelle ends up left on her own to manage her descent. As Kneeland said in a press release following these two incidents, "It perplexes me that hikers who start as a group do not finish as a group. By simply following the hiker responsibility code as set forth in the hikeSafe program, many of these mishaps could be avoided."

Back Up There. We return to the upper night slopes of Lafayette. The 911 call about the four missing teenagers set both COs and volunteers from the Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue Team in motion. As those rescuers drove toward the trailhead, and Lt. Kneeland coordinated support for Michelle, AMC's Greenleaf Hut crew ("croo") soon scrambled to search for one of the four missing teens. The hut full of guests had tucked in to dinner, when three of the teens arrived in tears and very cold. They had, they said, been left behind by their school group. One of the girls also had injured her arm by falling on the rocks. The fourth, Marianne (no last initial was available), the croo learned later, had been left behind somewhere up on the mountain when she had trouble keeping up. Because this was the students' first time on the Franconia Ridge and the weather was foul, and because translation from French to English was a barrier, the missing student's location wasn't clear beyond her being "up there."

Recognizing the threat of hypothermia on this rainy, 40-degree night, hutmaster Ryan Koski-Vacirca and visiting former hut croo member Jeff Colt, both veterans of a number of search-and-rescue incidents, conferred with their AMC supervisor via radio and received permission to search for Marianne. The pair climbed quickly to Lafayette's summit, where Colt recalled, they "started doing concentric circles and calling her name." A radio call from assistant hutmaster Ali Garvin, who had been helping warm and comfort the three

teens and working to keep order in the full hut, helped Koski-Vacirca and Colt refine their search a bit. Garvin reported that the missing girl had been between the summit and treeline when the others had left her.

Koski-Vacirca and Colt began descending, each 100 feet off the trail and calling Marianne's name; they ventured out a little farther to check on possible caves where the missing girl might have sought shelter, but the pair took care to maintain contact in the sightless night and rain. When they reached treeline, the searchers hadn't found the girl, and there they met two other searchers from the hut. Soaked and cold, the four searchers retreated to the hut for food and warmth. There, they talked further with the other teens and checked in with their supervisor.

Taking stock of their own fitness and resources, and fielding a request that they divide their numbers and check below the hut (in case Marianne had bypassed it in the dark and kept descending), the current and former croo members conferred. Being careful not to compound the emergency by sending out someone who might also get in trouble, the croo identified five who could respond: Hutmaster Ryan Koski-Vacirca, Thacher Carter, Asher Brown, Phoebe Howe, and Risa Fox. Ali Garvin, Joscie Norris, and Leslie Fink would stay at the hut to help the three girls and manage the flow of information and the guests (more on that later).

Above treeline, the Greenleaf Trail clammers across loose rocks and ledges near Walker Ravine and then jogs left and north to a sort of dogleg before wrapping around some prominent ledges and climbing straight to the summit. The dogleg's turn toward the south is easy to miss while descending, even in daylight. Parsing the three teens' descriptions of their ordeal and using their knowledge of the terrain, Colt and Howe suggested the area near that dogleg as the likely place where Marianne might be. Koski-Vacirca, Carter, and Brown would climb to the dogleg and begin searching the trail's sides, while Howe and Fox would climb through the dense krummholz on either side of the trail to treeline, searching the shelter of the trees as they rose, and then stay a hundred yards or so on either side of the trail and work their way up. Howe remembers checking continually for Fox's headlamp to be sure that the pair of searchers didn't stray out of contact and into their own trouble.

Just before midnight, Koski-Vacirca called down to the hut saying that they'd found Marianne about 100 yards south of the trail near the cliffs above the dogleg. She was worryingly hypothermic, but, after some warming and

assisted movement, ambulatory. Howe recalls that initially the rescuers had to support and carry Marianne, but that quite rapidly she regained mobility. The group reached the safety of the hut at around 12:45 A.M. At that point, Kneeland was able to contact and turn back NHFG conservation officers and members of PVSART, who were climbing the Old Bridle Path to look for the missing teen. Kneeland was also in touch with the chaperones from the Achigan School at their hotel. They expressed some relief that the girl had been found and made plans for two chaperones to hike up to Greenleaf the next morning to bring the teens down, while the rest of their group pursued another hike. Everyone agreed that the four girls would spend an unplanned night at Greenleaf.

Comment: The litany of error and irresponsibility by the Achigan School and its chaperones is self-evident. Had their stranded student died that night—a near certainty had the AMC croo not found and rescued her—the school and its students would have had to endure deep remorse and likely legal action.

Begin with the group's choice to ignore advice from trail stewards and climb into clouds, rain, and certain risk of hypothermia; add in the group's unwieldy size, inappropriate clothing, and apparent lack of plans for check-ins and intercommunication; and then arrive at a moment when four of the teens get left behind and swallowed by night high on Mount Lafayette. You have before you an example of bald, remarkable misconduct in the mountains. All afternoon, Howe reported to me, the Achigan school group's members had rolled through Greenleaf and kept going down the Old Bridle Path, until, as night came on, none remained on the mountain—except for the four girls. When asked if he wanted to stay at the hut and wait for the girls, the school trip's leader said, no, he thought not. Maybe they went down the Skookumchuk Trail, he said. And then he went down too. The chaperones didn't reappear until midmorning on June 4, when two of them hiked back to the hut to retrieve the girls. Throughout, those who had contact with the chaperones reported them to be concerned, but not overly so, unaware it seems of how close they came to losing a student.

How had the four girls come to be at the end of the Achigan School's line? As they reached Lafayette's summit, the girls were hiking alone and in the thick clouds. As Howe pointed out to me, they'd been told to follow the white paint blazes of the Appalachian Trail, and atop Mount Lafayette they missed the sign

for the Greenleaf Trail, but they found the next white blaze. That led them on to the Garfield Ridge Trail. Howe also said that, in her summers of experience in this area, that mistake is a common one, and, perhaps without overdoing it, the signs for the Greenleaf Trail could be bumped up in size and prominence.

Once headed north on the wrong trail, the four girls kept on until a fortunate meeting with some hikers, who first discerned the girls' mistake and then turned them back up Lafayette. By the time the girls summited again, they'd slipped to last in line.

Howe also noted that the girls were wearing leggings, cotton sweatshirts, and only thin ponchos for rain gear; in short, they weren't close to having the gear needed for a cold, wet day with strong winds on an elongated exposed ridge. The toll of that exposure, lengthened by getting lost, was clear when Marianne couldn't go on and crawled up close behind a rock, where she felt she was "waiting to die."

AMC's croo response, on the other hand, was swift, knowing, and prudent, even though for the Greenleaf Hut croo members, it was barely the season's beginning and they were just becoming acquainted with the hut and their work's rhythms. That the croo had also the resources of two experienced former hut people in Howe and Colt was a piece of luck for all involved.

Inside Story. All of that is dramatic enough, a ratification of the training that hut croos bring to their work, and evidence that sometimes even good skill also needs good fortune. But even as croo searchers plumbed the wet, windy night outside, there was much to do inside the isolated outpost of the hut to focus on supporting the three shaken girls and finding their missing fourth. This inside story draws upon the generous notes of Greenleaf's 2017 assistant hutmaster, Ali Garvin, as well as an account from Jeff Colt and a conversation with Phoebe Howe, and it gives a rare glimpse into some of the work behind the scenes of a rescue. Airlift yourself into the remaining hut croo's boots: What are you managing while the five searchers fight up through the darkness, and how will you do it?

The Greenleaf 2017 summer croo had just reached its first weekend of the season and had 48 guests, a number of whom had needed warming when they reached the hut. As Garvin recalled, "I remember the day of our first SAR as a croo, not only because it was the first pack day, but also because I had never seen a hut dining room more packed with people escaping the torrential downpour and winds that had been pelting hikers on the Franconia Loop all weekend. Throughout the day, hikers stumbled in trembling, shivering, and

seeking refuge, and a number had required treatment for mild to moderate hypothermia.”

Already the hut’s supplies of juice and towels were running low, and rumpled blankets needed drying too. Now, as the long twilight ran through its gray tones, all hands were turned to dinner. As is common in mountain huts, pre-dinner time is social, and stories of the day’s adventures fill the air. Kids, their energy reserves restored, race around, and adults often dip into wine or beer lugged along for just this time of day. It’s convivial and crowded, albeit a little rowdy and loud. Dinner gets served family style, and it’s easy to imagine that this really is a mountain family.

That family spell broke quickly when the three hypothermic girls stumbled into the room crying. Garvin wrote that the girls were “wearing cotton sweatshirts and skateboard sneakers underneath their thin plastic ponchos. Everything that followed occurred extremely quickly.” It’s common to say that emergency reveals us for who we are, and, as Garvin worked and watched in this room shot with crisis, that seemed especially true.

The hutmaster Koski-Vacirca, a veteran of a number of searches and rescues, shepherded the three girls to a bunkroom where he could both assess them and hear what they had to say. As Garvin notes, “The hut croos of the AMC are required to be Wilderness First Aid certified,” and Koski-Vacirca also brought the empathy of someone aimed toward medical school. But even in that more private space, he had to compete with a number of guests who had been jolted by the current of emergency running through the room. Some followed Koski-Vacirca and the girls into the room and shouted and hovered in their concern. The girls repeatedly told the croo that their concern was for the girl (Marionne) they’d left behind.

Out in the main room, there was also the sort of shouting and hurrying nowhere that emergency seems to summon, and Garvin and her croo tried to both “maintain calm and finish dinner service as quickly as possible.”

A sketchy sense of where the girls had been and where their fourth might be developed as Koski-Vacirca talked with them. One of the three was fairly proficient in English, but, of course, they were disoriented by their experience. The ad hoc rapid response plan had Koski-Vacirca and Colt headed for the summit to search, while Garvin and croo cared for the three girls and worked at what was now clearly crowd control.

Garvin wrote the following description, which contains behaviors familiar to many SAR veterans and outlines the challenge her croo faced:

Maybe it is helpful here to break down the guest behavior I witnessed throughout the evening. Immediately, as the girls stumbled over our threshold, adults sprang up and ran to the girls as they were rightfully concerned. But (I express this with trepidation about the placement of women in caregiver/homemaker roles) many of the women impeded Ryan from performing necessary medical assessments and getting information, as they hovered and often shouted over him in misguided attempts to calm the girls or convey the urgency they saw in the situation. Thus the adults not only amplified the already tension-filled atmosphere in the room, but they also impeded us from the tasks we were trained to do, by constantly questioning our sense of urgency and capability.

Furthermore, immediately as Ryan and Jeff began to gather their packs to head up to the summit, some visibly intoxicated dads shouted phrases like, “I’m going too!” or “They need a man up on that mountain looking for her!” after which the women yelled at me how ready their husbands were to head up that mountain. I explained that Jeff and Ryan were both mountain professionals, with the necessary experience, training, and skills to handle the situation, yet the adults barely shot a glance my way. As I turned around to continue communicating with our valley coordinator, Stefan, via radio, one of the female guests, who approached me with three other women, grabbed my shoulder. I guessed from her red face and furrowed brow that they weren’t there to offer help or any sympathy. Instead, she yelled at me full volume, telling me I had no right to have this job, as I clearly had no idea what I was doing. She was appalled with my audacity to “take my sweet time” to send out help, and as a mother, she couldn’t “fathom how cavalier” I was being with a young girl’s life on the line.

Earlier I pointed to the common wisdom that we reveal who we really are via emergency, and in this instance that seems on target. People expected flurried action, when what’s often called for is calm assessment and gathering of resources. Garvin then reported further collision between the situation and the guests’ expectations. Again, this will ring familiar to many emergency responders:

Not once did anyone question the capability of any male croo member. Of course the woman [who yelled at Garvin] could not have

understood the SAR process in that moment, and her anger was undeniably coming from a place of concern for someone's life, but the way the group of guests reacted and interacted with us during the SAR certainly felt differentiated by gender. As Jeff and Ryan ran out of the hut to a chorus of praise and awe at their heroism, a few guests murmured, "Thank God there's some guys, who actually know what they're doing," and, "Did you see the calves on that guy? Gotta be thankful for that kinda build in a situation like this." As Joscie, a female Wilderness First Responder-certified croo member, attended to one of the girls who had a sprained wrist, guests surrounded and hovered over her, talking over Joscie as she tried to speak with her patient. Guests came up to the front desk and asked only male croo members what was going on, implicitly expecting male leadership in backcountry spaces. Despite the legitimate confusion and concern expressed by the guests that night, their inappropriate behavior impeded us from doing our job efficiently, and exacerbated the stress levels for everyone in the hut, so that communicating with the girls became extremely challenging, and they became increasingly anxious about the trauma they had just experienced.

Emergency then is combusive—and revelatory. Its aftermath also provides opportunity for reflection, which can lead to learning. I'm grateful to Phoebe Howe, Jeff Colt, and Ali Garvin for their recollections and thoughts. Even as I have been in emergency's presence and felt its electric prod a number of times, I find that looking back at it helps me see first who we are and, better, who we might become.

Lost Then Lifted

Spring must have seemed increasingly distant for Randy W., age 53, after he set out on a planned four-day backpack in the Pemigewasset Wilderness around 1 P.M. on April 28. His route would take him in along the Wilderness Trail and then up to a traverse of the Bonds, Zealand Mountain, and the Twins before dropping down to Galehead Hut. From there, he would take the Franconia Brook Trail down into the Franconia Brook drainage, returning to his car at the Lincoln Woods parking area on the Kancamagus Highway by Monday, May 1.

Like many on-ramps to adventure, the Wilderness Trail is an easy saunter, and the work of climbing and navigating the Pemi area doesn't begin until the turn up toward the Bonds, nearly five miles from the trailhead. That initial walk, although somewhat sodden from snowmelt and the way water runs across sometimes still-frozen ground, would have offered little resistance, though an experienced hiker could not help but have heard the roar of the nearby river providing proximate reminder of all the hurried water in all of the valleys ahead. The mix of meltwater and cool-to-cold temperatures would suggest to that experienced hiker that crossing brooks safely and staying dry would be a priority.

Randy spent the first night on Mount Bond, but from April 29 on, his route becomes less clear. His recollections, given to NHFG's Sgt. Thomas Dakai on May 5, suggest that he climbed over Mount Guyot, may have diverged to Zealand Mountain, and then backtracked on the Twinway to keep on to South and North Twin. From there, it seems that he dropped down to Galehead Hut and then took either the Twin Brook Trail or Franconia Brook Trail to the intersection with the Lincoln Brook Trail. At some point in that area, Randy lost the trail. He then consulted his GPS, which he said did not have a mapping program. It told him that he was 3.5 miles west of Route 93; Randy decided to try to hike off-trail to 93. A quick look at a map (Randy told CO Dakai that he had lost his) reveals that Franconia Ridge stands between Lincoln Brook and Route 93.

Along the way, Randy fell into a brook, encountered deep snow, and the weather turned rainy and cold. On May 2 in midafternoon, feeling unable to continue, he called 911. The first call got dropped before any conversation could happen; the second lasted several minutes, and the 911 supervisor was able to provide NHFG with some information about Randy's route and two sets of coordinates from the two calls. But Randy clearly wasn't sure where he was, saying that the last mountain he recalled climbing was North Twin, and when NHFG tried calling back they got only voice mail identifying the phone's owner as Randy.

That call set off the season's largest search, one that didn't end until the evening of May 4, when a New Hampshire Army National Guard helicopter plucked the severely hypothermic Randy from the back side of Mount Lincoln and flew him to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. As NHFG's Colonel Kevin Jordan said to a reporter from the *Concord Monitor* on May 5, "He

might not have survived a carryout—that’s three hours. His pulse was 40, his core body temperature was in the 80s; he was hours away from death.”

Before that helicopter rescue took place, NHFG COs first had to find out who Randy was, a search that led them eventually to his brother, Dan. Dan was able to provide COs with a map of Randy’s proposed route, and, on May 2, after neither of the coordinates from the first two 911 calls turned out to be Randy’s location, NHFG planned for a more thorough search on May 3.

Dakai wrote, “The focus [of the 3rd’s search] was to cover the trail system of Randy’s itinerary left with his family.” And so a mix of COs and volunteers, a number of whom were ferried to their search areas by a NHANG helicopter, walked those trails. The helicopter also searched as best it could but was limited by the low clouds. No sign of Randy turned up, and so the rescuers devised a new plan for May 4. That plan, Dakai wrote, “would focus on covering the drainages that Randy might have gone into after getting off trail.” Improved weather allowed the helicopter to drop searchers above most of the drainages, meaning they could at least walk downhill as they searched. Between ferrying missions, the helicopter also could search, and on that day the Civil Air Patrol also had planes flying search grids over the area.

A 2 P.M. call from 911 alerted NHFG that Randy was back on the phone. (He said later that he finally had been able to recharge it with a solar charger.) Though Randy was unsure where he was, he did describe to Dakai that he was in a rocky, open area, and the 911 operator did provide new coordinates for his location. The call was then dropped. But now searchers had a smaller area to consider, and the NHANG helicopter helped get searchers into position to check on the new coordinates, which suggested that Randy was on the west side of Franconia Ridge, not far from the Old Bridle Path. Then the helicopter also resumed searching.

A little after 8 P.M., NHFG Lt. Scott F. Lacrosse texted Dakai from the helicopter. They had sighted Randy via the red light on his headlamp, and they were about to pick him up from a slide on the east side of Mount Lincoln.

Comment: Though early reports from Randy’s search classed him as “an experienced hiker,” his wanderings and decision making point to the opposite. One person who knows him said during the early stages of the search that, although Randy had hiked some in the past, he tended to be “reckless” when he did so. Events bore this description out. When Randy embarked on his hike, he said he was fully equipped for nights out. By the time he was found,

he had lost his tent, sleeping bag, winter hat, and map. (Sgt. Dakai found the latter on May 5 in the pocket of a bag Randy had been carrying.) Such loss of direction and shedding of gear might not cause dire trouble in high summer, but during the late spring, it put Randy in peril. It also indicates a disorderly approach to the often-critical work of staying warm in cool or cold weather. Here are the average temperatures from the nearby Mount Washington Observatory for May 1 through 4: 42, 35, 23, and 27; the total precipitation for those four days was as follows: 1.39 inches, 0.63 inch, 0.56 inch, and a trace. That's trouble-brewing stuff.

The search also consumed chunks of time from 22 NHFG COs, the NHANG helicopter crew, and pilots from the Civil Air Patrol. Then there were the seventeen volunteers from PVSART and Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, plus others from the Grafton County Sheriff's Department and the U.S. Forest Service.

A significant frustration for NHFG and the searchers lay in Randy's carrying a GPS but lacking the facility to give searchers his coordinates when he called for help. Although phone calls can produce coordinates, they are not always accurate, as has been clear in a number of incidents reported in this column. Thus, each device a hiker carries should be a "practiced" one, meaning the hiker has used the device often enough to do so, even under stress.

Following trails in late spring can also be much tougher than doing so at summer's height. Paths dip in and out of snow, water runs freely erasing tracks, and footing can be iffy. All that raises the stakes for a hiker, especially one who chooses a multiday solo trek that includes a number of watercourses.

To make such a choice, a hiker should be an expert. Randy clearly was not an expert. His ordeal and the subsequent huge effort to extract him from it began where most troubles do: in the little room where we assess our capabilities and make our plans. It's best to be humble there before stepping into mountains that can reduce one to a struggling speck.

A Few Shoulder-Season Snow Notes

The incident preceding this note, in which Randy encountered deep snow and postholed without snowshoes, occasions these few thoughts about spring snow.

Snow forms its own worlds, worlds so various that whole books get written about them. Here, I want only to think a bit about snow in its vanishing season and the ways it can shape our walking. Snow walking is, of course, an

art: one part analysis, one part intuition. Each snow surface you seek to cross is different, and your ability to “see” both the snow’s skin and its subsurface and know what it means can offer a measure of safety. Or, if you suffer the delusion that all flakes are the same, peril. If you would like to learn about snow more quickly than via floundering, a good place to begin is the USFS Snow Ranger’s Mount Washington Avalanche Center website (mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org). And if your curiosity pushes you further, you might visit avalanche.org, the joint site of the American Avalanche Association and the USFS National Avalanche Center.

But spring’s remnant snow often asks for different parsing. The question often isn’t will it move? Rather, it’s will it hold me up? Attached to that question is a second: What should I wear on my feet? Or, how many footwear options do I need to carry when I go out? The approach and sun-slope trails may be bare and dry in the lowlands, but the dips and valleys turned away from the sun may still hold snow measured in feet. Because this snow is the residue of winter, it is often consolidated, sometimes near ice in density, and such snow can often support your weight. Even your weight with a full pack. This tempts hikers to leave the snowshoes at home.

That same consolidated snow can have weak points, however. Chief among them is undermining by water draining from the snowpack. Water-eroded snow can go from feet to inches thick in a stride. And punching through those inches can plunge you into a hole, leave a leg dangling, or smack your foot/leg into stone or wood. Also capable of generating weak points in a snow crust are stones and tree trunks hidden below the surface but warming more quickly than the snow. Having snowshoes, even when they seem unnecessary, can avoid much of this. And snowshoes, while slower footing than bare-booting, also avoid the exhausting work of postholing. Each of us with some hiking years underfoot probably has a postholing memory; recalling my own gets me to strap snowshoes to my pack whenever I might find snow in the shoulder season of spring.

Other Note: In a future column, we’ll look at the seldom delightful “mono-rail” that forms on trails when companion snows beside those trails melt.

Long Work Done Well

Late on the afternoon of May 5, 16-year-old Anna S. was part of a group of five nearing Imp Shelter when she broke through the packed snow on the trail and twisted her knee. Companions in Anna’s Summit Achievement group

(a residential treatment center in Stow, Maine) took her pack, and Anna hobbled with assistance the remaining half-mile over the next two hours. At Imp Shelter, Anthony L., an emergency medical technician and one of two group leaders, assessed her injury and found Anna mildly hypothermic. He was able to rewarm Anna, and she stayed comfortable in her sleeping bag throughout the night.

In the morning, ten additional staffers from Summit Achievement arrived and hiked to Imp Shelter to assist Anna. This group brought rescue gear, including a litter, and hoped to bring Anna out. She could not walk, and, after further assessing the weather and trail conditions and the length of carry needed, the group decided to call for help. NHFG's Sgt. Mark Ober got the call at around 11 A.M., and he set about getting help.

Ober called AVSAR and AMC asking for volunteers. He also called in NHFG COs Glen Lucas and Eric Fluette. Lucas was able to drive his all-terrain vehicle about 1.5 miles up the Stony Brook Trail to shorten the carryout. By 2:45 P.M. Lucas had driven in, parked his ATV, and then hiked up to where the Summit Achievement group was making slow headway coming down. Lucas reported the trail as slick, rocky, and treacherous, and said also that the demands of litter-carrying had been beyond four of the group's capabilities and so they had been sent out ahead. Lucas asked that a rescue-wheel that attaches to the underside of a litter also be sent up, and Ober found that AVSAR's wheel was available to go up with the next rescuers to arrive.

The difficulty of the carryout kept Ober on the phone searching for volunteers, and he found a trove of them at Stonehearth Open Learning Opportunities, where a Wilderness First Responders Course was in session. At around 4:30 P.M., seventeen SOLO volunteers arrived, and they were joined by three more from AMC. By 8 P.M. the rescuers had reached Lucas's ATV, and by 8:30 P.M. Anna had arrived at the trailhead, where she got a ride to a nearby hospital for treatment. Ober accounted for all the volunteers and closed the rescue by 9 P.M.

Comment: I chose this rescue for the resilience of the injured hiker, her group's preparedness and willingness to take care of its own, and for their wisdom in seeing that, finally, they needed help. The rescue, an arduous carryout over a trail made doubly difficult by water, snow, and ice, was a classic White Mountain good story of generous volunteerism joined to professional competence. Two added notes: The tricky nature of spring snow features in this accident; also, all rescuers take on risk—one of the volunteers from AMC slipped during a stream crossing and injured his chest when he hit a log.

The River Reminds

Summer's often the season when we seek out water. Its cooling, cleansing touch seems like the perfect antidote to the clotted heat that bears down on us. That can be especially true in the backcountry, where time on foot summons sweat, and we look for streams to wash it away. Water then buoys us.

Until it doesn't. The following incident is a reminder that whenever we seek out water, we are seeking also the backcountry's most volatile element, and so it's good to approach cautiously. That, unhappily, wasn't 36-year-old Daniel M.'s approach to Franconia Falls on July 10. Around 4:30 P.M. that day, Daniel, his brother Jacob, and their parents arrived at Franconia Falls. They'd learned of the falls on the internet, and they arrived prepared to enjoy the cooling waters. The brothers got there first, and Daniel stripped to his swimsuit and took his goggles and jumped in.

When he surfaced, Daniel appeared to be struggling. An eyewitness later told NHFG COs that "something didn't look right," and Daniel floated over to the west side of the pool. After some seconds Jacob noticed a problem too, and he jumped in to help his brother, trying to hold his brother up and get him to the pool's edge and out. But the struggle to do so was too much and Daniel slipped under twice more and then didn't resurface. Others nearby came to help too, but Daniel had disappeared in the turbulent water. At around 8 P.M. NHFG COs were able to retrieve Daniel's body from the pool.

Comment: This incident offers a reminder that even with others around, few are capable of rescuing someone from difficult water. So, even though numbers of people at a swimming hole suggest a margin of safety, that's often an illusion. The river, in all its variability, reminds us that waters demand a cautious approach, especially when we are new to them. Water truly is the Whites' most volatile element. We run out of time quickly when drowning's the threat.

In Foreign Lands

On July 15, summer's heart, four Chinese citizens studying at Harvard University drove north from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to take a Sunday walk in the mountains. Around 9:30 that evening, NHFG CO Josiah Towne got a call from his sergeant, Thomas Dakai, asking him to drive to the Welch-Dickey trailhead, where the four hikers were reported to be stranded a mile up the trail without lights. Qiuying S., Zhuang G., Lubin L., and Xia Y. (ages not reported) had set out at around

5 P.M. to walk the 4.1-mile Welch–Dickey loop, an ambitious plan in face of an 8:18 P.M. sunset. Their rescue, effected by a Waterville public safety officer and CO Towne, consisted of providing lights and guiding the foursome down. Once they were at the parking area, Towne was able to inspect their two packs, finding that they had some water, snacks, first-aid kit, and notebooks, but no added clothing or other gear.

Comment: This final and usual incident offers a reminder too. Often, when we are in foreign lands, we don't have the familiar scaffold of context; then, even what seems a simple walk can become steps into trouble. This foursome made errors easily identifiable to even casual mountain hikers: late start, insufficient gear and supplies, etc. But a central dilemma in the Whites gets highlighted here. Our mountains are so easily reached, within a day's drive for tens of millions of people, that people can simply show up and go out. How to prepare such new arrivals for the mountains' foreign lands occupies the thinking of everyone associated with search and rescue in those uplands.

— *Sandy Stott*
Accidents Editor