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Accidents

Analysis from the White Mountains of New Hampshire and occasionally elsewhere



The Pemigewasset Wilderness in winter is beautiful, remote, and sometimes dangerous. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

In Deep

When many of us set off from a trailhead, we hope at some point to “get in deep,” to arrive at a place and a state of mind seldom visited, one where the day’s only news is scripted by weather and the crawl of seasons. The madding tumult of polity and politics recedes then for a while, and we can attend to our old selves and the mostly hidden lives of animals and trees, to the so slow pulse of stones. That we can walk to and still find such places is both salve and miracle. That “getting in deep” also offers a common metaphor for trouble

seems both a necessary and hard companion to our escapes. Sometimes, once found, “deep” can be a hard place to leave.

This column searches stories and rescues for the moment when a hike or a climb morphs from a day away to one of trouble. Often we clearly recall that moment—a slipped step, a blank wall of woods where the trail should be, lightning’s flashing announcement of a weather front—but even in these instances, reconstruction of the path to that moment can be chocked with small decisions, some made with foresight, some made without it. Knowing the content and character of those decisions can help us develop an awareness that offers a little added safety in our adventures.

Heartland

For a number of us, the beating wild heart of the White Mountains lies in the Pemigewasset Wilderness. There, we can be as remote (in crow-flight miles) from roads as anywhere else in those mountains; on Bondcliff, a slow sweep of the surrounding horizon reveals only more mountains. Like all of its brethren Whites, Bondcliff and its siblings, Bond and West Bond, are oft-visited, so their solitude often contains other seekers, but there the feeling of being “away, in deep,” persists.

Pursuit of that feeling drew 26-year-old Jack H. to the Pemigewasset on December 24, 2016, a day when he was likely to be alone. The forecast for the day reinforced that possibility because it called for snow shifting to rain near the storm’s end; then, usual winter cold was predicted to blow back in. Jack set out from Lincoln Woods some time after 8 A.M., having left a trip plan with his father, Edward, indicating that he planned to climb the Bondcliff Trail to West Bond and then return later that day. He texted his parents around 4 P.M. from the area of the Bonds, saying that he was running late but expected to be home around 10 or 11 P.M. Concerned when Jack had not returned by late night on the 24th, Edward contacted Lincoln, New Hampshire, police, who checked the Lincoln Woods parking area at 2 A.M. and saw Jack’s car. Edward called again in the morning, and at 8 A.M., Lincoln police confirmed that Jack’s car was still in the lot. That news prompted Edward to call New Hampshire Fish and Game; District 3 Lt. Jim Kneeland then called Edward back, gathered information, and set about responding.

Edward said Jack was experienced, having climbed many of the high peaks in the Northeast, and well equipped but not carrying overnight gear. Still, the

22-mile length of Jack's projected hike and stormy weather on the 24th suggested a possible delay in his getting back out. Kneeland resolved to send a conservation officer in along the Lincoln Woods and Bondcliff Trails to look for a sign of Jack. A little before 10 A.M. Conservation Officer Kevin Bronson set off on his snow machine. Bronson called at 10:30 A.M. from the Bondcliff Trail where it turns northeast from the former Wilderness Trail junction, saying that he'd found no sign of Jack. After Bronson waited there a half-hour, Kneeland then pulled him back out and summoned two more COs, Eric Fluette and Brad Morse. By 1:30 P.M. Bronson, Fluette, and Morse were headed back in the nearly five miles toward the old trail junction on snow machines, and a little after 2 P.M. they donned snowshoes and heavy packs and began to climb the 4.6 miles to Bondcliff.

Thick snow slowed the COs. They took turns breaking trail, checked possible campsites, and managed their clothing layers to minimize sweating. The COs were hoping, of course, to find tracks that might lead them to Jack. But on Christmas, when many are tucked into tables and dinner at home, the COs found only fresh, heavy snow. Then, at around 8 P.M., the COs came upon tracks and, soon after, Jack's body near the large cairn on the exposed summit of Bondcliff. They called Kneeland, and, after making a plan for the night with the COs, Kneeland set about turning the next day's planned search into a recovery.

By the time the three COs found Jack, the temperature had followed the forecast to near 0 and the winds had ramped up. Kneeland asked the COs if they felt OK spending the rest of the night on Bondcliff, and they answered yes. When Kneeland checked back in with them a while later, they assured him they were OK.

By 5:30 A.M. they were up and about atop Bondcliff, where they awaited the sunrise so they could examine and photograph the scene of Jack's death. The day broke windless and clear. Jack's backpack was 10 feet away from him in between two rocks, and his crampons were just above the pack. Jack was wearing Merrill three-season hiking boots. Everything was open, and his gear was scattered. His phone and cables lay on the rocks under his pack, and batteries were out of the headlamp and on the ground. Jack had one arm in his Gore-Tex jacket but the jacket was twisted and unzipped. His puffy coat underneath was on upside down and unzipped.

At 7:50 A.M. the flight crew aboard a New Hampshire National Guard Blackhawk helicopter made contact with the COs, and, after ascertaining

that they couldn't land in the area, hoisted the three COs and Jack's body aboard and flew to the parking area at Lincoln Woods.

Comment: This is a straightforward hypothermia death, although how Jack got there forms a puzzle. When found, he was wearing winter clothing, but the outer layers of that gear were on in a "confusing" manner. Such a finding is consistent with the tendency of hypothermia victims to grow confused about their condition and reality. Searchers frequently report finding victims partially undressed in response to the delusion that they are too warm, or because simple tasks such as donning a jacket become suddenly complex to the hypothermic mind.

Here, we turn to this question: How does a reasonably experienced hiker end up losing his way and life in such a fashion? Jack had spent a good measure of time in the woods and mountains during his 26 years and, according to his obituary, he also had the experience of a 72-day National Outdoor Leadership School training course in the Yukon while in college.

We look first, as is often true, to the weather, both its essentials and what it implies. The forecast—snow on the 24th, going possibly to rain at storm's end, followed by cold—joined with the holiday to suggest that few if any others would be out in this remote area, setting up the near certainty that the trail would, at some point, not be broken. And yet when found, Jack had no shelter, sleeping bag, or snowshoes with him. Because his experience would suggest carrying all three on this winter hike, we have to assume that he left them behind intentionally. Here we arrive in the decision-making terrain we all walk before we hike or climb.

Experience teaches us we should pack for worst-case scenarios, even when our plan is to go out and back in a day. But worst cases weigh more than optimism's minimal gear. And when our experience always has included coming back, we may begin to leave out some of the weight of safety; carrying that weight time and again and never using it can tempt us to say, "Oh, I'll leave this stuff today. It will make me faster; I'll sweat less; it will be easier."

The forecast for December 24 also carried a deceptively subtle warning: Snow with possibility of rain indicates warm-for-winter temperatures. We know enough to feel the elemental fear of deep cold and high winds; we shy from them. But this forecast also contains a killer—temperatures around freezing mean wet snow, and, as a hiker works at going up, especially if he must break trail, liberal sweat. Both of these are stage-setters for hypothermia. Once, while reading some of Laura and Guy Waterman's work (few hikers in

the last 100 years have threaded as many trails in as many different weathers as the Watermans), I came across a picture of them hiking along on a snowy day. What made the photo odd was that, there in the snowy mountain woods, both Laura and Guy were carrying umbrellas like London strollers. Take a moment to count the number of times you have passed winter hikers using umbrellas. OK, we continue. Their article explained the umbrellas: Wet snow falling and melting on you is a surefire way to get soaked, they said. And getting wet with snow everywhere and temperatures in the 30s makes getting dry and staying warm very difficult. Better to keep the snow off, they wrote.

Here, we think, lies the likely key to Jack's tragedy: The weather and work of hiking through thick snow soaked him; once wet, he couldn't get dry, and the cold began to do its work. That scenario would have been perilous even had he carried shelter and a sleeping bag, but they would have afforded him a chance to strip off the wet clothes, keep any new snow or rain off, and rewarm himself. The scatter of Jack's belongings that the COs found mimics the way the hypothermic mind scatters—clothing and reason get turned inside out; it all grows "confusing."

Also, holding off hypothermia takes more than staying dry, or having shelter in which to dry off. When the COs found Jack, they noted that he had three water bottles, each under a liter in capacity. One of the bottles was empty; one was half- and one completely full. If, as is likely, those bottles represent the total of what Jack drank, he was likely to be dehydrated, which jumps a hiker's susceptibility to hypothermia. As comparison, CO Morse said that to stay hydrated, he drank two full liters of water while climbing the 4.6 miles to Bondcliff. COs also found no food with Jack. Even if he'd eaten liberally during the day, he'd have needed more food to fuel his walk out or to survive the night he was trapped in.

Finally, a 22-mile round-trip day hike on trails that are likely to have unbroken sections of new snow is a very ambitious plan. Jack's 4 P.M. text indicated that he had gotten to his goal. It also indicates that the cold may already have been at work. If Jack texted from near the summit of Bondcliff, he was more than 8 miles and, in the day's conditions, a good five-plus hours from his car. Add in a drive of three or so hours, and you find that the figures projecting his being home between 10 and 11 P.M. are off, just the sort of impaired calculation common to hypothermia. The way out must have quickly gotten as murky as the twilight from which he sent his message.

—Sandy Stott and Ty Gagne
(See Gagne's article, "Weakness in Numbers," on page 56.)

You Don't Have to Go Far

When you're on the novice end of the experience spectrum, you don't have to go far to get in deep. A 6:28 P.M. call for help on January 5, 2017, illustrated that. The caller, Xusheng "Alex" W., age 17, of Toronto, Canada, was having trouble making his stove work and couldn't fully set up his tent at the Liberty Spring Tentsite on the Franconia Ridge. He was cold and dehydrated. Alex was also alone.

The rescue that ensued, coordinated by NHFG Lt. Jim Kneeland and accomplished by Sgt. Mark Ober and CO Bob Mancini, was a garden-variety sort: Ober and Mancini used snow machines to get to the Liberty Spring trailhead, climbed to the tentsite, warmed Alex with hot drinks and helped him hike out, arriving at the Flume parking lot a little before 1 A.M. The rescue's backstory, however, asks telling.

After flying from Toronto to New York City, Alex took a bus to Hanover, New Hampshire, and, from there, a taxi to the trailhead for the Flume off Route 93 on January 5. He climbed away from the parking lot bearing a pack heavy with new equipment and an altered plan to spend the next four days covering 44 trail-miles in the Pemigewasset Wilderness. Alex's original plan had been altered a day earlier when he and his mother had spoken with CO Jonathan DeLisle at NHFG headquarters in Concord, New Hampshire. Hobbled some by the difficulty the family had understanding English, DeLisle had advised strongly against Alex's initial plan to hike from Woodstock to Gorham alone, adding that recent weather had made the trails very icy and travel hard, even for an experienced hiker. Kneeland later learned that the family had also called the Appalachian Mountain Club and received the same don't-go-there warnings.

But there, on the night of the 5th, Alex was, and there at the trailhead Kneeland sat, in his truck that often serves as an incident command post during a rescue, on the phone with Alex's mother, summoning her to fly to Manchester, New Hampshire, the next day to retrieve her son. Kneeland had just gotten off the phone with Alex after advising him to get in his sleeping bag and await the two officers climbing up. In his official report, Kneeland described what Ober and Mancini found:

At 2214 hours, CO Mancini and Sgt. Ober reached the Liberty Spring Tentsite and located Alex W., who was in his sleeping bag inside his tent, which was not staked up because he did not know how to set the tent up. The COs gave him warm fluids and got him dressed for the hike back out. CO Mancini

determined that Alex's pack was very heavy, so he gave the tent to Ober to carry and then lightened the load further by leaving most of Alex's food at the site, including two bags of mangos, four jars of Nutella, and a large salami.

Comment: At the heart of this incident lies a common parent–child tension—the child seeks to set out on his own, to become himself or herself through some sort of test; the parent tries to get the best advice about the safest route. But once that advice suggests no trip-test at all, trouble ensues. It's easy to see—even from spare details—that Alex had no business setting off in winter with equipment he couldn't use properly on a multiday solo hike. As Kneeland pointed out later, Alex was actually lucky he hit trouble early, where it took only a few hours for help to get to him. Had he been in by Bondcliff or elsewhere deep in the Pemi Wilderness, where phone contact is sketchy and it would have taken longer hours to find him, Alex might have encountered a different ending.

Step now beyond the obvious understanding that Alex didn't have the requisite experience and shouldn't have been allowed to go. What then? Anyone who's ever shared space with a brooding 17-year-old wants an answer. Kneeland's last line of his report suggests one: "I then provided her [Alex's mother] with the phone number for the International Mountain Climbing School in Conway [New Hampshire] to see if they could hook Alex up with a guide."

That advice, given in the aftermath of the rescue, when Alex next proposed to his mother that he do a series of day climbs before going home, is perfect. If, when we reach our breakaway age, we are lucky, we find a guide. That guide, while serving in a demi-parental role, carries none of the real parent's emotional baggage with her or his child, and so there is a chance the younger will listen, learn, and make a test trip without meeting trouble. Some guides or teachers are paid, as are those of IMCS; some may be friends or relatives, luckily found.

Night Phones: A Call from the Ridge

A scan of incident data makes it clear, but I still like to point out on occasion that much of the rescue work in the Whites takes place off hours. The two incidents just reviewed involved night work, as will the next two. Someone's having an off night in the mountains often means no night off for rescuers.

The sun was near setting on February 15, 2017, when NHFG's Lt. Jim Kneeland got a 4:15 P.M. call that a hiker was having trouble finding his way near the summit of Mount Lafayette. Not that anyone could see the sun, as it was snowing heavily, and Vincent H., age 25, of Quebec, Canada, had called his girlfriend at home to say that, after reaching the summit at 3 P.M., he had lost the trail while trying to descend. Kneeland began the calls that gather the information needed to mount a rescue: Vincent's intended route, how equipped he was, whether he had companions (he was hiking with his two dogs), and any other relevant details. Calls to Vincent didn't get through, but a text did draw a 4:57 P.M. response to Kneeland's question: Do you need help? "Yess," said the text.

Kneeland texted Vincent to call 911, and the dispatcher transferred the call to him, where, with a translator's assistance, Kneeland figured out that Vincent had slid down an icy ledge and felt trapped at its base. Kneeland was able to match Vincent's phone's coordinates with a texted map location he'd gotten earlier to fix Vincent's location just south of Lafayette's summit. Kneeland figured it would take about six hours to reach him. He summoned NHFG COs from the Advanced Search and Rescue Team (of which Kneeland is the leader) and members of Mountain Rescue Service.

Then the 911 supervisor called to say that Vincent and the translator had continued texting; Vincent had rediscovered the trail and was going to go "down." That worried Kneeland, because if Vincent followed a trail in that area it would be the Franconia Ridge Trail north up Lafayette or south up Mount Lincoln. Both routes are mostly above treeline and would further expose Vincent. If, on the other hand, Vincent actually went "down," he might end up in the Pemigewasset Wilderness or in Walker Ravine. Kneeland told the 911 people that he hoped Vincent would stay put because they had a known location for him, but the link between Vincent and 911 had gone silent.

Not knowing if Vincent was moving forced Kneeland to split his NHFG team and send one group up the Old Bridle Path (at 7 P.M.) and the other up the Falling Waters Trail (at 7:40 P.M.). Snow was still falling heavily, with temperatures in the 20s. (Nearby Mount Washington got a foot of snow on the 15th and an added 11 inches on the 16th.) MRS rescuers were to follow with a Sked litter, which can be snaked through tough terrain. An 8:50 P.M. text from Vincent provided clarity that he hadn't moved, and MRS started up the Old Bridle Path a few minutes later.

Vincent's audible panic on a 10 P.M. call further amped up the night but provided little other information, as the mix of a language barrier and Vincent's screaming made his words unintelligible. The NHFG teams reported slow going because they had to use snowshoes and break trail all the way. The Old Bridle Path team passed Greenleaf Hut (a mile below the summit of Lafayette) at 10:50 P.M., and the MRS team, following the first team's tracks, caught them just shy of the summit a little after midnight. At 12:45 A.M., MRS's Brian Johnston called from the summit, saying that they could see a flashing light and hear a dog barking. A few minutes later, the team was with Vincent, where, using the shelter of a Bothy Bag, they began the work of rewarming him. By 1:30 A.M., having rewarmed Vincent and given him some dry clothes, the teams began their walk out, getting back to the trailhead a little before 5 A.M.

Comment: This incident, while rife with uncertain communications and extended by the slow work of also navigating a storm that dropped waist-deep snow, suggests short analysis. A solo hiker set off at 9 A.M. on a winter-mild morning but in the face of a forecasted storm. He took six hours to reach the summit of Lafayette, a far too lengthy allotment of time for a February hike—a turnaround time of noon to 1 P.M. would have been OK. He then got caught by the storm, and once caught, didn't have the skill to get down. Nor did Vincent know enough about where he was to figure out how he might get into safer terrain.

Vincent's hours trapped in the storm were a near thing. Had NHFG's and MRS's teams not reached him, the storm and hypothermia would have claimed him. When MRS rescuers got to Vincent, he was cold and asleep, not waking until they were right with him, despite the barking of his dogs. Vincent had also lost his gloves in the gale, he said, leading him to contemplate killing and cutting open one of his dogs to rewarm himself. Even as fantasy, that's a desperate sign. Vincent acknowledged to Kneeland his debt to his rescuers, saying he felt that they had saved his life.

A Night Near the Boulder

A few minutes after midnight on April 23, 2017, NHFG District 1 Lt. Wayne Saunders got a call from the state police dispatcher. Alexander S., age 27, from the Czech Republic, felt he was in trouble somewhere above Glen Boulder on its eponymous trail. Saunders was able to make erratic phone contact with Alexander via 911 and learned that strengthening winds had bent Alexander's

tent poles, tearing the tent fabric and letting in the flying snow. Neither wind nor snow had been present when Alexander set up camp for his first evening of a planned multiday hike. But Saunders also ascertained that Alexander was warm and mostly protected in his sleeping bag and extra clothing, and so not in immediate peril. The two agreed that Alexander would hunker down for the night's remainder, and COs would start up at daybreak to check on him.

At around 5:30 A.M., Alexander made another worried call. NHFG COs Matt Holmes and Glen Lucas began climbing just after dawn, and around 9:30 A.M. they met Alexander just above Glen Boulder as he descended with support from a Samaritan hiker, Claude V., who had encountered Alexander earlier that morning. The COs escorted Alexander down.

Comment: The night scene of Alexander's initial call marks this rescue, asking us to imagine what prompted a well-outfitted hiker to punch the three digits of emergency. When Alexander set out on his multiday hike, he was carrying all the essentials, and when he pulled over for the night somewhere above Glen Boulder, the wind was light. Both the spot above treeline and the weather seemed agreeable. Alexander awoke to a different night: winds up, tent poles bent, snow fingering into his shelter. Panic ensued.

And yet, the day's weather summaries from the nearby Mount Washington Observatory don't speak of what we often think of as extremes. Temperatures hovered in the upper 20s, with the winds averaging 27 MPH; the top gust blew through from the northwest at 51 MPH; 2 inches of snow fell. The 23rd reads similarly: temps in the 20s, winds averaging 39, top gust of 67, half an inch of snow. White Mountain veterans shrug at such reports, even as they also know trouble comes easily in such typical shoulder season weather. These veterans, however, are unlikely to be found in a tent, above treeline on Washington's upper flanks, unless they're training for some alpine escapade in the world's big mountains. In that case, the veterans would be in winter tents built to withstand wind and snow.

But for someone unfamiliar with the Whites and the way wind can work on a tent, the absolute darkness and the varied, pitched voices of wind could seem ready to blow life away. Those voices ask only questions: Will my tent last? Will it blow harder? Will the night wind, finally, blow me away? And so, the call. Saunders's ability to get the essentials of the moment, even over sketchy phone connections, and build a plan to check on Alexander without exposing his COs to the risks of a night rescue is laudable. His experience in and knowledge of the Whites balanced out Alexander's lack of both. Added voice: The second call at 5:30 A.M. underlined how long such a night can feel.

A Short Note on Going Solo

All four incidents examined thus far involved solo hikers. Readers of this column have probably noted that I don't condemn solo hiking as simply out of reason's bounds. In fact, one can argue that an experienced, fit solo hiker can travel winter's backcountry more safely than some groups. But choosing to go it alone puts a premium on all of a hiker's readings—of weather, of self, of terrain. Should conditions, external or internal, change, you need to know in detail where and who you are. Although Jack seemed on his way and closest to such a level, none of the four solo hikers chronicled in these incidents had the familiarity and mountain-nous to be where he was.

Composed Rescue

Editor's note: The following incident, selected for its resonance with and contrast from a famous August 1959 tragedy on Cannon Cliff, is excerpted from Critical Hours: Search and Rescue in the White Mountains, Sandy Stott's book due out in spring 2018 from University Press of New England. In 1959, two young men from Connecticut got trapped partway up Cannon Cliff, and the ensuing rescue attempt took two days to unfold. The young men died of hypothermia just as rescuers reached them. That rescue is told at length in Appalachia ("The Cannon Mountain Tragedy," by George T. Hamilton et al., December 1959, 2 no. 4, pages 441–461.)

Every day, as he sets out solo on his rounds, NHFG District 3's Lt. Jim Kneeland does so behind the wheel of a 2012 Chevrolet Tahoe that's equipped as a mobile command post. Its truck bed can accommodate a snowmobile or all-terrain vehicle and Kneeland "usually carries enough equipment to equip a couple of rescuers, if they need more stuff." The Tahoe is also supplied with mobile radios for contact with search-and-rescue units, as well as cell phones and laptops that are loaded with, among other things, a mapping program. "It is a very comfortable rig," says Kneeland. Given that on a rescue-intensive weekend the Tahoe can become a second home for him, that's a good thing.

On November 19, 2016, a 10:39 P.M. call for help from Cannon Mountain summoned Kneeland from a comfortable night at home back to his truck. It had been a moderate late-fall Saturday, with the temperature on nearby Mount Washington averaging 43 degrees Fahrenheit with light winds. A colder day was on the way, as was some rain, which up high sounded more

like ice. On Cannon's iconic cliff, which rises above Franconia Notch, two Massachusetts climbers, William S., 29, and Michael F., 23, were stuck some few hundred feet below the top. Earlier in the day, the pair, who had climbed quite a bit throughout New England but never on Cannon Cliff, had aimed up a popular route named Moby Grape. But, after starting late and encountering route-finding difficulties that slowed them, they'd been benighted. Still they had persisted, until finally they felt unable to go up or down.

Kneeland used the climbers' call to plot their location, and, after he advised them that they were around 390 feet below the helicopter-landing zone at the cliff's top, the climbers said they'd try to find another route up to that point. Kneeland checked back in with them just before midnight and found them still stuck but game for another attempt. Finally, the climbers called back just after 1 A.M., saying they were right back where they'd been when they first called. Noting the wet, going-toward-winter forecast, Kneeland decided a night rescue was necessary, and that meant calling the high-angle experts from MRS and figuring out how to get them in place to effect a rescue. He made that call at 1:14 A.M. Readers of White Mountain accident history may recall the 1959 Cannon Cliff tragedy of Alfred Whipple Jr., 20, and Sidney Crouch, 21, both of Ledyard, Connecticut. The differences between the 1959 and 2017 rescues of stranded climbers on Cannon point to how much has changed over these years, and to what someone in Kneeland's position can command when called today.

MRS, founded in 1972, makes the biggest difference, and in that group's climbers—Steve Larson, Kurt Winkler, Paul Cormier, Joe Lentini, Charlie Townsend, and Geoff Wilson—Kneeland had six of the region's finest. Their drive to Franconia was a short one. Still, it was a lightless night, and the climbers in need of rescue were stranded far up the cliff; getting to them could be an iffy proposition. But here, too, Kneeland and MRS had a new resource: During recent years, as Cannon had continued to attract its share of rescues, SAR groups had plotted the GPS coordinates of places where an anchor could be set to lower rescuers from the cliff's top. With the coordinates of the stranded climbers also available, Kneeland and the MRS climbers found that they could choose an anchor directly above the pair, and, if all went well, rappel down to them and bring them back up. That, of course, would be far less work and far quicker than climbing to them—and far safer. MRS's Cormier later reflected that the location of the route down to the climbers had been “the perfect marriage of 21st-century technology and old-style experience. We

had the GPS coordinates, and I had been to this route a number of times. I could say, 'It's just over here a little way,' and the coordinates confirmed that."

Such a plan prompted another concern: It would be great to drop from the top, but getting to that top would take time, too. Must rescuers hike up Cannon before dropping down from its crest for the rescue? Kneeland ran through his list of contacts and pressed a number, rousing one of the Cannon Tramway operators. Here were the fruits of a trade Kneeland had made last year, bartering some work investigating a skier's death for the home numbers of tram operators. He now had a way to get rescuers and as much gear as they wanted to the mountaintop. That carrying capacity counted importantly too: the tram could accommodate both rescuers and however many ropes they needed; lugging as much up on foot would have taken time, and likely led to thinner support for the rescue.

MRS's six climbers arrived at around 4 A.M., and Kneeland then sent them and fellow CO Josiah Towne up to clifftop on the tram. He then drove the Tahoe to a particular spot on Route 93. "I've got a spot down here for each route on the cliff," he said, reflecting the number of times he has been called there. Each roadside spot gives him clear sight and radio lines for a route up. Also, before Towne went up to help the MRS climbers, Kneeland told him that he was to do whatever the MRS climbers wanted, even if that "means sitting in a bush watching." With this directive, Kneeland was setting up a clear chain of authority. He was also calling on experience. The dark clifftop of Cannon can be tricky to read; in a few steps, someone can go from nearly level ground to cliffside. Kneeland wanted no added trouble that night. Cormier recalled that Towne was a big help: "He worked like crazy as we hauled the climbers up."

With the anchor set on a preselected spot above the climbers and lined up with Kneeland's truck lights in the valley, Larson went down over the edge a little after 5:30 A.M., dropping right to the two men, while his MRS colleagues tended the anchors. When each stranded climber was ready to come up, the five MRS rescuers and CO hauled hard. One at a time, each was brought back up to safety by 8:30 A.M., and then they all took a much more prosaic walk back down to the base, where they arrived around 10 A.M.

With Sunday still stretched before him, Kneeland was back in his Tahoe.

Comment: The rains washed in, and the temperatures dropped. November 20 averaged only 23 degrees atop Mount Washington. But by then, everyone was off the cliff. Though technical climbing incidents are not usually the

province of this column, I've included this one for its example of the resources upon which White Mountain search and rescue can draw now. This rescue offered a happy ending in clear contrast to a draining, two-day saga in August 1959, when rescuers had to be summoned from afar and two Connecticut boys died of hypothermia high on Cannon Cliff.

The Beauty of the Mountain Civic Body

This report's final three incidents are linked by the mountain altruism of those nearby or summoned to help. Even before official rescue could be mounted, the work of rescue had begun.

On November 13, 2016, a 10:30 A.M. call alerted NHFG Sgt. Mark Ober to an emergency a half-mile below Carter Notch Hut on the Nineteen-Mile Brook Trail. James N., age 59, had collapsed suddenly as his large party of Boy Scouts and their chaperones descended from the hut. Members of the party had already begun CPR, although Ober wouldn't know that until he was able to establish communication with the group via Chris DeMasi, the Carter caretaker who had descended to the group and who had cell phone coverage. Meanwhile, the initial report led Ober to summon COs Matt Holmes, Glen Lucas, and Eric Fluette and Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue volunteers Mike Pelchat and Diane Holmes. Ober also called the New Hampshire National Guard to see if he could get helicopter assistance, and they scrambled to gather a crew and fly to the scene.

The rescuers who rushed to the scene reported that James's group had kept up CPR during the roughly two hours it took for them to get there, but, sadly, even as rescuers carried with them advanced medical equipment, nothing could be done to save James. The National Guard's Blackhawk helicopter was aloft by 12:40 P.M., and not long after 1 P.M., it arrived, coordinated with rescuers on the ground, and lifted James's body out.

In the aftermath, AMC provided private space for James's family to gather and learn the details of his death; NHFG also summoned its chaplain to provide support for the family and the Scout troop.

An 11:50 A.M. call from Cannon Cliff on February 4, 2017, informed NHFG Lt. Jim Kneeland that climber Nick P., age 47, had fallen some 50 feet while on the third pitch of the Black Dike route. Kneeland contacted the caller, David S., a climber who was lower on the same route and in voice contact with the injured man. As David assessed the situation, he said



On February 4, 2017, rescuers lower Nick P., who had fallen 50 feet while climbing the Black Dike route on Cannon Mountain. NEW HAMPSHIRE FISH AND GAME

he and others on the scene could lower Nick to the cliff's base but would need carryout assistance from rescuers once they reached the talus slope below the cliff.

Kneeland set about gathering that assistance, calling on the Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue Team and NHFG COs, and those rescuers began to reach the base of the cliff a little after 2 P.M., just as David S. and an estimated thirteen other climbers completed lowering Nick from the cliff. From there, Nick was carried and then hauled finally via snow machine to the roadside and taken to Littleton Regional Hospital.

On the same day at around 3 P.M., Nicholas K., 32, fell while backcountry skiing on Mount Moosilauke's Carriage Road. His companion, Corinna O., called 911. NHFG CO Greg Jellison called the number provided by the 911 dispatcher and got a man named Stefan, who was part of a large party that had come upon Nicholas and Corinna. Stefan's group had repurposed a plastic sled they had with them and was now hauling Nicholas out. Stefan estimated they would reach the trailhead at Breezy Point Road around 5:45 P.M., which they did. Jellison and members of the Warren and Wentworth fire departments met the rescue party there.

Comment: Even as many of us leave a trailhead in the Whites to get away from the jostling of everyday life, in our popular and peopled mountains, other seekers are often nearby. That those seekers almost invariably gather to help when trouble occurs, often showing resilience and inventiveness in support of whoever has fallen, offers a redemptive look at us, the mountain drawn. Each of us hopes for a lift from getting in deep in the hills; sometimes that lift comes from the spirit of sister- and brotherhood common in that terrain.

— *Sandy Stott*
Accidents Editor