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Accidents

Analysis from the White Mountains of New Hampshire and occasionally elsewhere

TO WRITE (AND, PERHAPS, TO READ AND MAKE SENSE OF) THESE reports, one must have a mind of winter. Yes, that phrase was made famous by the American poet, Wallace Stevens, in his poem, “The Snow Man” (“One must have a mind of winter/To regard the frost and the boughs/Of the pine-trees crusted with snow”). But its prosaic necessity visits even the most meter-allergic wanderer as she or he readies for a winter foray into New Hampshire’s White Mountains. Too often in these pages, we read of mountain walkers who approach the winter hills with a mind of summer and so find there an alien, unforgiving world.

To rediscover my winter mind, I’ve returned to notes I made during the now-legendary winter past. Here are some from the middle of February 2015:

It’s months before my deadline, but here in winter’s belly, I’ve decided to make some notes before spring (I’m assuming it) and summer dull my memory. That these last four weeks have been historically snowy is common news fodder along the arc of our coastline. The Whites, on the other hand, have been just averagely white—enough snow to excite avalanches and snow-amour, but nothing too too . . . much, unlike Boston, where a whole new set of “Whites” lines the streets, and walking and driving mimic the trudge of snowshoeing. Yesterday, someone who was either a wag or owner in mourning spray-painted a large hillock of snow, “Please don’t move. There’s a car under here.” Much of urban life seems similarly buried.

But the cold in the Whites has been another matter. Also yesterday, the Observatory on Washington reported an air temperature of minus 33 . . . with winds over 100 miles per hour, for a windchill of nearly minus 100. One wind gust was measured at 141 MPH, the gustiest since 2008. Just

wow. And, sadly, up into this maelstrom walked Kate Matrosova, a solo hiker intent on a Northern Presidential traverse—Madison to Adams to Jefferson to Washington and down. She went up around 5 A.M., before the forecast—amply predicted—became itself; she did not come down [*Editor's note: see "Too Cold," an essay about this incident, in this issue*].

That all those who tried and were beaten back from the first rescue attempt did come down seems a miracle. That this winter's midsection has not been rife with more such incidents seems also a surprise. Just as we hope for spring somewhere out there, here in season's midsection, I'll hope for no more tragic misapprehensions of the winter we're in.

I got my wish. Even as the extremes—cold, snow—continued for some weeks after Matrosova's tragedy, much of the rest of the news from the White Mountain search-and-rescue world was routine, even benign. Here, then are a few of the winter's other stories, offered with the hope that they will help readers conjure minds of winter for the new season now bearing down on us.

Thermal Unrest

At 8 P.M. on November 28, Stephanie S., age 23, and Thomas G., age 24, called 911 from Camp Penacook on the flank of Mount Chocorua. Having hiked the three miles in to the camp, the pair intended to stay the night and then climb to Mount Chocorua's summit in the morning, but the cold and dropping temperatures worried them. Hypothermia seemed to be creeping in, and the pair was unsure how to handle it.

New Hampshire Fish and Game personnel received the message and called Stephanie and Thomas back, offering advice and support. The two were told to pack up and start walking out; two conservation officers would drive to the trailhead and begin walking in to meet them. The temperature at the trailhead in Albany was 16 degrees when Officers Alex Lopashanski and Christopher Brison began hiking toward the descending pair. By the time the four met at mid-trail, Stephanie and Thomas had warmed from their hiking and no longer felt hypothermic. The two COs escorted the pair to the trailhead, where they all agreed that the pair needed no further attention.

Comment: Stephanie and Thomas were adequately equipped but inexperienced. According to Lopashanski, "They didn't have a lot of

confidence” by the time they called 911. Late fall’s long darkness and cold have a way of amplifying fears, and, when there’s no experience to counter worries, the night ahead can seem unsustainable. Although the pair’s call for help is understandable, it’s also an unfortunate commonplace in our era of instant communication. I hope that the lesson carried away from the incident is one about managing cold and selves and not the ease of summoning help. Also, as noted often in this column, weather in the “shoulder season” between fall and full winter often surprises people, whose thermal calendars often lag behind reality.

Lopashanski told the *Conway Sun* that he was glad Stephanie and Thomas called. “It could easily have gotten colder,” he said. (That was the forecast.) And if they had become impaired by the cold, rescuers would have had to organize a more complex, labor-intensive rescue. “And then that’s worse for everybody,” Lopashanski concluded.

Terrain Trapped

On New Year’s Day, Mazin A.-D., whose age was not reported, called his friend Joe D. to ask for advice about finding his way down from the Mizpah Spring Hut area. While the two spoke, the connection failed, and Joe was unable to raise his friend again. Joe then drove to Crawford Notch, found his friend’s car, and hiked up for 45 minutes toward the hut, where he encountered a group descending. They said they had not seen Mazin. Joe then turned around, stopped at the Appalachian Mountain Club Highland Center, and reported Mazin missing. The AMC notified Twin Mountain police, who in turn called New Hampshire Fish and Game at 7 P.M., and together the AMC and NHFG began to gather a rescue crew. An AMC search team climbed to Mizpah Spring Hut but didn’t find Mazin; meanwhile, in the notch, NHFG conservation officers checked along the Mount Clinton Road (officially closed in winter) and Route 302. Neither officer located Mazin.

NHFG then formed two search teams composed of COs and AMC personnel. The first team aimed to search the Webster-Jackson Trail to Mount Jackson and on to Mizpah Spring, while the second team would search the Webster-Jackson Trail to the Webster Cliff Trail. The rescue effort ended at approximately 3 A.M., when Mazin walked into the Highland Center. During an interview with NHFG, Mazin said that, while near the hut, he had lost “the blue trail,” backtracked to the hut and ended up on “the white trail,” backtracked again, but lost that trail. Eventually, he’d located a streambed and

begun to follow it down. That led him to the Dry River Trail, which in turn led him out to Route 302, where he got a ride back to his car. He then called Joe, who advised him that a search was in progress.

Comment: NHFG's interviewer found Mazin to be "fairly well equipped and dressed in good clothing," but without "a few essentials, like a compass and fire-making materials." He also noted that Mazin carried a map but seemed most concerned with the color of the trails' blazes and not with trail names, suggesting that he lacked an overall sense of where he was.

The thick subalpine scrub and forest in this area is challenging, especially in winter when snow often masks the treadway and the blazes. Add in darkness and its disorienting effects, and you can picture Mazin's trouble finding his way. Once lost, his resilience and effort to self-rescue was good and, ultimately, successful. The route into the Dry River drainage and out is a difficult one; that he emerged that night speaks of good endurance. He was also fortunate that the weather was mild for the season, 26 degrees at 7 P.M., and so his primary challenge was finding his way.

A few more tools might have made this self-rescue a non-event: a compass matched with his map might have allowed Mazin to orient himself at the hut, even as the trail was tough to find. I find that time spent with a map before I go in or up pays off, especially when I am solo. By the time I begin walking, I have mostly memorized the terrain, and I have all the nearby trails firmly in mind. That interior map is useful if the weather turns, and it allows a constant measuring of immediate versus overall terrain. Although a global positioning system might have been useful, I favor a map because, even when folded into smaller sectors, it offers a better sense of what surrounds you than a small screen can.

I wonder why this story didn't make it into local and regional media. It seems a worthy one of self-rescue, with more nuances, for example, than the liberally reported, preceding story.

Added generosity: At its meeting on January 21, the NHFG Commission accepted a \$1,000 gift from Mazin and his wife for the Search and Rescue Fund and future SAR efforts. This gift was made even as NHFG did not recommend that Mazin be charged for this search.

Iced Trouble

Purgatory Falls in Mont Vernon, in southern New Hampshire, lies outside this column's usual territory (though within that of NHFG), but I include it

here as reminder of the way that walking's most volatile element, water, can become even more dangerous during winter. On bright January 25, Dorie G., age 50, and a friend set out to look at Purgatory Falls. They hiked the short route from the parking area to Upper Falls, the most prominent drop of 5-mile-long Purgatory Brook, which drains into the Souhegan River after tumbling some 900 vertical feet. According to news reports, Dorie "was apparently looking over the falls or approaching the overlook when she slipped and fell over it, onto the largely frozen pool at the base of the falls." The current carried Dorie under that ice, and rescuers couldn't extract her in time. She died beneath the ice. Dorie was wearing shoes with traction, reported as "ice cleats." Several inches of new snow had fallen before the two had arrived at the falls.

Comment: Rivers, especially around steep drops, are the riskiest of our backcountry destinations; they appear consistently in accident reports in all seasons. That risk is magnified when ice slicks ledges, and when snow can mask that ice. Though cleats, microspikes, and crampons can mitigate that risk, they also can create a false sense of security. It doesn't take much to unbalance a walker as she or he steps forward on spikes, and, once unbalanced, slipping and falling can happen quickly. And winter water is, of course, frigid, often with a lid of ice that forms an additional hazard. Dorie was an experienced hiker, runner, and biker. Our sympathies to her family and friends.

Prepared for Extremes

On January 31, a cold, blustery day, Monoswita S., age 28, and four Connecticut friends started up the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail on Mount Washington. The forecast predicted deep cold and high winds. At about 3 that afternoon, as the group prepared to descend from Lakes of the Clouds Hut, Monoswita fainted, and, when she came to, she was still only partially responsive. Her group, which included her husband, called 911; they were advised to keep Monoswita level and await rescuers. But the intense cold, estimated at -5 degrees, and high winds, worried them, and, when their next call was patched through to NHFG Lieutenant Wayne Saunders, he concurred that waiting in those conditions was risky. The group then packed Monoswita into a sleeping bag, secured it to ropes, and began a descent, ferrying and dragging her down the trail, where, just after 5 P.M., they encountered rescuers from four volunteer groups and NHFG. Monoswita was taken to the hospital, released some hours later, and reported to be in good health a few days later.

“I’d say they were pushing it,” said Saunders of the group’s decision to climb on that day. But he also praised their effort to get down from trouble. “They knew if they stopped moving, they would probably die.”

Comment: This group’s self-sufficiency was admirable. If you are going to climb into hard weather, you need to be prepared for the unusual, and they were. It is also telling that Nick P., age 36, one of the climbing group members, said he was humbled by the experience. “If you’re going to go there, you need to be prepared and know what you’re doing,” Nick told a reporter.

Accounts Receivable—Six Times Up

I’ve gathered the next six incidents into a single account because they share two characteristics. First, those rescued were ill prepared for their ventures. Second, the reporting officer from NHFG recommended each individual or group be billed for the rescue. So many incidents falling into these categories points to officers’ growing willingness to assess responsibility when confronted with reckless conduct. Along with the agency’s new hikeSafe Card, available for \$25 as insurance against being charged should you need rescue, this trend suggests a more assertive approach to funding what is also NHFG’s increasingly professional rescue emphasis and capability. Both developments are shifts in the SAR culture of the White Mountains.

Late in the afternoon on November 23, three Keene State College students, Adam P., age 20, Jacob L., age 19, and Bernard D., age 20, hiked into the Bear Den Natural Area in Gilsum to watch the sunset. The day was a cool one. A little before 5:30 P.M., Adam called 911 to say that they had become disoriented in the early darkness and were lost. NHFG Officer Jonathan DeLisle responded, zeroing in on the 911 call’s coordinates and walking the students the 0.3 miles out to their car at 6:30 P.M. The students had no extra clothing and only the lights from their cell phones for guidance.

On December 30, the temperature hovered in the single digits, and at 4:10 P.M., NHFG got word of a 911 call made from the Garfield Ridge Trail. NHFG Lieutenant James Kneeland called the number back and talked with Tyler W., age 19, and Michael G., age 19. The pair said that, leaving at about 9 A.M., they had aimed to do the Falling Waters/Old Bridle Path loop, but that they now found themselves a few miles beyond Mount Lafayette’s summit on the Garfield Ridge Trail. Kneeland confirmed their location and heard that they had no lights or overnight gear; he advised them to keep moving toward

Mount Garfield and then begin to descend the Garfield Trail. Kneeland then sent two conservation officers to meet and assist the pair. The COs found Tyler and Michael at 7:20 P.M., gave them warmer gear and fluids, and brought them down the rest of the way. The men were dressed for three-season hiking, and, although they carried some extra gear, they were unprepared for the full winter conditions they found on the ridge.

Our winter of note was still full in the Whites on March 9, when an 8 P.M. call came into 911 and was sent on to NHFG. Three hikers, Sara H., age 33, Nicholas P., age 32, and Jasmine H., age 11, reported being very cold, wet, and in trouble on the Kinsman Pond Trail above the AMC hut at Lonesome Lake. NHFG asked the AMC's Lonesome Lake Hut caretaker to take the family some dry winter gear (they had no gloves, hats, or appropriate footwear) while COs and a volunteer gathered to climb the Cascade Brook Trail for the rescue. By 10 P.M., the AMC's caretaker had reached the family with equipment and support to begin descending. At 10:45, conservation officers and the volunteer reached the group and provided further equipment and assistance. The group emerged from the woods a little after midnight.

CO Robert Mancini offered this listing at the end of his official report:

- The group did not eat dinner prior to beginning their hike at 5:00 P.M.
- The group was not wearing any winter hats or gloves and had only one winter hat for the group.
- The group did not have any navigational aids.
- The group did not have any extra winter clothing.
- The group did not have a first aid kit.
- The group did not have any winter hiking experience and was unfamiliar with the area.
- The group did have a lighter and bag full of encyclopedias (Nick stated that the bag was packed with books so he could get a workout).
- The group did pack two twenty-ounce bottles of water and snacks.
- The group did have one working flashlight.

At 4:15 P.M. on March 19, NHFG received word of a 911 call made by John N., age 20, from the side of Mount Chocorua. The dispatcher said that John was near the Westside Trail and holding on to a tree in deep snow and stuck between two ledges. Four COs and two volunteers converged on the Liberty

Trail parking lot. Meanwhile, as rescuers worked their way up toward John, he called 911 repeatedly to underline his desperation. At 7:30 P.M., an officer found John, helped him from his perch, and then escorted him toward Jim Liberty Shelter. John had begun his climb at 12:30 P.M., reached the summit at about 3 P.M., and slipped just below the summit on the way down. He was wearing running shoes, cotton socks, jeans, a hoodie, and a jacket; he had no hat or gloves or backpack. When rescuers reached John, his jeans were frozen solid.

At about 5 P.M. on March 22, NHFG received a call from Mount Moosilauke in Glenciff. The day was windy, and the temperature at the trailhead in late afternoon was 11 degrees Fahrenheit. A group of six hikers from MIT reported that one of their group was very cold and having trouble feeling her legs and feet as she descended. Two hikers had gone ahead and called for help. While three COs gathered to begin hiking up to assist, the remaining hikers emerged from the woods at 6:35 P.M. The hiker in difficulty, Shengyang W., age 25, was then assessed. CO Josiah Towne reported the following: “Shengyang W. was not dressed for the weather. Her clothes were wet and partially frozen. Her gloves were thin driving-style gloves and frozen. She did not have a hat. She was wearing a black synthetic top with a sweater over it and corduroy pants, She wore sneakers. Others were similarly dressed, with only slightly better clothing. I inventoried Shengyang’s pack, which was a small, pink child’s pack. Most items in it were not hiking related; they included a wireless mouse, portable hard drive.”

On April 4 at about 3 P.M., NHFG received a call about Julia J., age 31, and Cordell N., age 35, two hikers who had lost the trail near the summit of Mount Pierce. NHFG tried to direct the hikers back to the trail via phone, but the hikers were unable to find their way. In wind and low visibility, the pair had wandered off the back (Dry River) side of the mountain; instructed to retrace their steps, they climbed back onto the ridge but still couldn’t locate the trail. Rescue teams then climbed toward their 911 coordinates, reaching the pair at 11 P.M. Rescuers ascertained that Julia and Cordell had gone on their hike in the face of predicted heavy snow, and they had done so without snowshoes or a sense of how to navigate above treeline in poor visibility.

Follow-up News—Pay as You Go Missing?

On April 30, the New Hampshire Supreme Court found in favor of the state and NHFG in their assessment of a \$9,186.38 price tag for the rescue

of Edward Bacon, a Michigander whose 2012 rescue in very difficult conditions from the Franconia Ridge figured prominently in our Summer/Fall 2013 (LXIV no. 2) column. NHFG had deemed Bacon negligent for his five-day attempt to cross this ridge after they had learned of Bacon's chronic hip problems and cursory training for his hike, both of which figured heavily in his call for help on September 18, 2012.

From the court case emerged a more detailed picture of both Bacon's physical condition and the rescue. And those details supported the state's contention that Bacon was negligent in both his overall attempt and on that particular day. Here is Assistant District Attorney Philip Bradley's summary of Bacon's condition when he approached his hike on a day when the weather forecast alone should have kept him from the Franconia Ridge:

When Mr. Bacon set off on a five-day, solo hike in the White Mountains on September 16, 2012, he was 59 years old, had undergone four hip surgeries since 2005, had an artificial left hip that had dislocated five times—including twice during the previous year—had a bad back, was on over twenty medications for a multitude of ailments, and needed to use two canes (not walking poles) for support while hiking. He had hiked in the area when he was younger and, despite his physical infirmities, apparently believed he could still conquer some of New Hampshire's highest mountains—the respective 5,089-foot and 5,260-foot summits of Mt. Lincoln and Mt. Lafayette—even in the stormy weather that had been forecast days in advance. Unfortunately for everyone involved, Mr. Bacon negligently exceeded his physical abilities under the circumstances. He made it only about halfway before dislocating his hip, necessitating a challenging rescue in horrible weather conditions that required approximately 50 Fish and Game Department personnel and volunteers during afternoon and evening of September 18 and into the early morning hours of September 19, 2013.

An Associated Press summary published in the *New York Times* on April 30, 2015, reported, "Bacon, an automotive engineer whose father grew up in New Hampshire, said he has hiked the state's mountains hundreds of times and had even considered retiring there. Not anymore, he said Thursday. And while he has hiked the same area of Franconia Notch twice since 2012, he doesn't know if he will return.

“It has soured me at this point,” he said. “I’m looking at western mountains at the moment.”

Comment: Happy to have Mr. Bacon look west for his mountains.

Wisdom from Snow Rangers

And finally, here’s a timely winter note from the Tuckerman Ravine’s U.S. Forest Service snow rangers and their essential winter website: mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org. It harkens back to the days before the long Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend last year, and it considers developing another facet of a mind of winter.

“Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend is often a busy weekend on the search-and-rescue side of things. This weekend will present a number of challenges for those venturing into our diminutive but feisty mountain range I may be preaching to the choir here, but here are a few things on my mind:

“All the rental gear in town is rented. Assuming that this gear was rented by novices, which is a reasonable assumption, there will be a good number of inexperienced folks on the mountain. They may be above you on a climb or descending a steep snow slope above you in your fall line. Hey, we were all novices at one time in our outdoor careers, but in reflection, most climbers and backcountry skiers I know freely admit to how close they came to blowing it at one point or another. Experience may be the best teacher, but it can be much harsher than a gentle and well-placed word of advice. People don’t tend to get hurt heeding advice or playing it safe, but the accident journals are full of the reverse.

“Inexperienced people have a pretty darn good safety record. Most rational people know their limits, listen to the concerns of the intuition, or otherwise make good decisions. It’s the inexperienced people led by people they perceive to be experienced that can create some of the sketchiest situations. This ‘expert halo’ human factor is referenced directly or indirectly in many catastrophes and is a subtle driver in the human decision-making game. Peer pressure and normalization of risk-taking affect everyone, and its influence sometimes drowns out the quieter, softer voices of reason.

“A cascade of errors’ is the phrase I’ve heard that best summarizes many accidents and incidents. A wrong turn, a faulty headlamp, iced-over goggles, or a turned ankle can all contribute to a bad outcome. Sometimes a simple

mistake can lead to much worse. Knowing your limits and thinking through problems carefully is difficult to do effectively with a calorie-starved brain, a body robbed of its precious heat, or a backpack depleted of necessities. There is a fine line between success and failure, and it often lies parallel to the line separating preparedness and a too-heavy pack or recklessness and boldness. It pays to always know, and reassess, which side of that line you are on.

“Sunday night would be a bad night to have some sort of issue requiring a rescue in the mountains. Never mind the windchill, cold temperatures, or avalanche hazards. Grumpy rescuers may be delayed coming to your assistance, especially if the Patriots–Colts Divisional Playoff game is a close one. Obviously, I’m joking. But really, be careful, especially Sunday afternoon and evening.”

—Sandy Stott
Accidents Editor



TO OUR READERS of the Appalachian Mountain Club’s *White Mountain Guide*: The Appalachian Mountain Club recently revised the acknowledgments in the *White Mountain Guide*, edited by Steven D. Smith and Mike Dickerman, to recognize the contributions of both Gene Daniell and Jon Burroughs. Here is an excerpt:

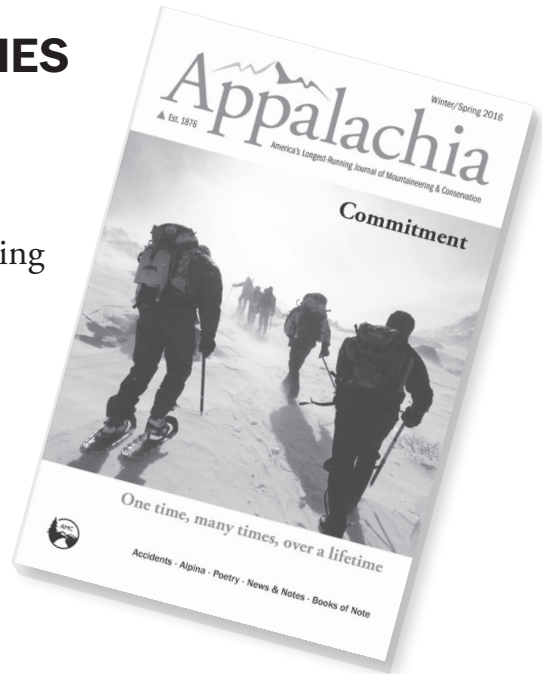
The current editors of the *White Mountain Guide* feel connected to a long and cherished tradition handed down to us by a century’s worth of editors and committee members. There are far too many names to list here—for a comprehensive history of the guidebook, see *White Mountain Guide: A Centennial Retrospective*, published by AMC Books—but two individuals helped to bring the Guide into the modern era. Gene Daniell edited this guide from its 23rd through 28th editions (a period spanning a quarter-century), and under his stewardship improvements in voice and the addition of key elevation data and a list of easy to moderate hikes were made. For ten years he worked closely with Jon Burroughs, associate editor of the 25th edition and co-editor of the 26th edition. Jon used a surveyor’s wheel and over the period measured every maintained trail in New Hampshire, covering more than 2,000 miles, and he took extensive notes in the field, contributing many corrections and the trail segment mileage that appeared in the book. We are honored to continue the fine work of both.

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