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Accidents



On March 29, 2014, the southeast-facing summit snowfield on Mount Washington slid broadly for the first time in many years. MOUNT WASHINGTON AVALANCHE CENTER

SNOW AND COLD GRACED MUCH OF THE WINTER OF 2013–2014 in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. In the high elevations, stretches of time passed without wind stirring the fallen snow. Above treeline, where gales usually strip snow from the slopes, instead snow accumulated and walking was soft. It all seemed a little fantastical, and, as if to underscore that, on March 29, the southeast-facing summit snowfield on Mount Washington slid broadly for the first time in many years. Though many parties were trekking in the area, no one got caught up in the avalanche, but looking at the photo above, it's easy to envision oneself climbing contentedly toward the blue sky above, suffused with a sense of open space and possibility, unaware that the very surface could give way.

For a complete understanding of this unusual avalanche, visit mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org and search the summary reports for 2013–2014 for its (and any day's) sense of snow in the Whites.

This column's mission is to consider such a juxtaposition of blue sky and possible trouble. And so let's begin with a story of self-sufficiency and competence. We will reach the other end of the spectrum soon enough.

Kilkenny Night

On the morning of January 10, Thomas R., age 44, and his black Labrador retriever left the Bunnell Notch trailhead to traverse part of the Kilkenny Range and return via the Unknown Pond Trail. The weather was temperate for January, with warming in the forecast. At 7 P.M. Thomas's girlfriend, Teri H., called New Hampshire State Police to say he was overdue and that she had not heard from him since an early morning text message. The state police in turn notified New Hampshire Fish and Game; Conservation Officer Mark Ober called Teri and got Thomas's detailed route plan and learned also that he was fully equipped for winter hiking.

At 9:30 P.M., Ober and fellow Conservation Officer Glen Lucas set off up the Unknown Pond Trail to find Thomas. Two hours into their search, Ober and Lucas heard a voice calling out, "Tom," and they answered. This brought them to Jason B., a hiker from Maine, who was searching for Thomas himself, having also heard from Teri while on his way to climb elsewhere. Jason had revamped his plans. He knew the terrain well, and it became clear that he was very fit and fast, a fact Ober noted in his report. Jason "soon outpaced" the two officers as all three tried to find the lost hiker.

About an hour later, just below Unknown Pond, the two officers came upon a set of snowshoe and dog tracks that veered off-trail and downhill; they followed these tracks for about a half-mile to where the walker turned around to return to the trail. Then, they continued up along the Kilkenny Ridge Trail, over the peaks of the Horn and the Bulge. At 1:30 A.M., Ober responded to a missed call from Teri and learned that Jason had located Thomas and that they were descending the Bunnell Notch Trail. The officers received confirmation that Thomas had reached the trailhead later that morning, and now, nearly equidistant from their own starting point, they slogged on, emerging from the woods at 7 A.M.

In a statement to NHFG, Thomas said he had lost the trail near Unknown Pond and, after searching for it, decided to backtrack. With no cell phone

coverage, he couldn't inform Teri of his change in plans, and the long walk and work of retracing his steps had delayed him. In his report, Ober wrote, "It was apparent that the trail system in the Kilkenny Range has not been blazed in quite a while," and, "it was easy to see where someone could get lost . . . especially when [the trail] is snow covered and hasn't been opened up by other hikers."¹ Ober went on to recommend fresh blazing of the trail and a sign at the point where Thomas lost the trail.

Comment: A few points catch my attention: Yes, Thomas set off alone in unfamiliar territory in winter. But he was experienced and he was well equipped should he have to spend more time out than anticipated. And, once Thomas had determined that he couldn't find the trail, he exercised good sense in backtracking, even though doing so meant climbing back over the day's three peaks and ensuring that he would be out well into the night. Jason appeared in this story like a bolt from the blue. He altered his plans for a night hike, located Thomas, and walked out to the trailhead with him. I do question whether he should have blazed on ahead of the two officers. Should he have tempered his speed and stayed with the officers? Going ahead risked that another person could have gone missing that night. Slowing down might feel difficult when one is fit and fast, but perhaps it's more prudent.

Finally, a note of appreciation about the uncomplaining, matter-of-fact report from Ober. He and Lucas were out all night, and, by the time Jason found Thomas, Ober wrote, "Looking at the map, CO Lucas and I saw we were 5.7 miles from the parking lot if we kept going south or 5.4 miles if we turned around and went back." The officers slogged on; this is the work they'd chosen.

Early Extremes

On the morning of November 29, Michael N., age 31, left Crawford Notch on the Crawford Path, aiming to cross part of the Presidential Range and descend the Lion Head Trail to Pinkham Notch. The Mount Washington Observatory had issued a windchill advisory for that morning and the coming evening, and at 5 A.M. on the 29th, the summit temperature read -9 degrees Fahrenheit with winds faster than 40 MPH. Just after noon, Michael called his

¹ The Unknown Pond Trail and the Kilkenny Ridge Trail are maintained by the U.S. Forest Service. In recent years, the government diverted some funds for trail maintenance to fighting fires in the West.—Editor.

wife saying he was at Lakes of the Clouds Hut and about to press on. But at that point, the wind kicked up snow, obscuring the landscape, and he had trouble locating the cairns that would guide him toward the Lion Head Trail. When he tried to circle back to the hut, Michael could find neither the hut nor the Crawford Path, but he knew he needed to get off the ridge and out of the cold that was starting to penetrate.

He came to the junction with the Dry River Trail and decided to follow it down into the Dry River drainage. From reading his map, he knew the way out to Route 302 would be a long one—9.6 miles. He was not aware that the Dry River Trail had been closed because of damage from Tropical Storm Irene in 2011.

As he descended, Michael lost the trail but found a relatively sheltered place to wait. He started a fire, but meltwater put it out; he then got into his bivy sack but could not stop shivering. He knew that he needed to move to stay warm, and so, after consulting his map and using his compass, he set out southeast, eventually rediscovering the trail. At 4 A.M., he found Dry River Shelter #3, where he tried and failed to start a fire. He paced until sunrise to stay warm, then continued down the trail. The way out took him all day. Just before sunset on the 30th, he reached Route 302 and flagged down a car whose driver took him to the AMC's Highland Center in Crawford Notch.

Meanwhile, Michael's wife, Shannon, had reported him overdue at 8 P.M. NHFG Lt. Wayne Saunders summoned searchers from Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue (AVSAR), Mountain Rescue Services, and NHFG. By 9:30 A.M. the next day, all the teams were deployed to various segments of Michael's projected route, and a New Hampshire National Guard helicopter had been summoned to fly over the route. A search team found tracks heading down into the Dry River valley at around 1:30 P.M.; the helicopter returned from refueling a half hour later and spotted more tracks around the shelter in the drainage, then flew up and down the river looking for Michael.

Michael said later that the helicopter passed over him three times, and that he had tried to signal with a mirror, but clearly the searchers couldn't see him. At 4 P.M., the helicopter tried to lift a search team from the Dry River drainage but could not do so. The searchers were notified of Michael's reaching the Highland Center at 5 P.M. The two teams remaining in the field spent the night out and then hiked out by 3 P.M. on December 1.

Comment: Once knocked off course by weather and whiteout, Michael proved resourceful in making his way out of a difficult situation. Like many

before him, he was driven by the cold northwest wind from the open plateau near Lakes of the Clouds toward the Dry River drainage. This area is always challenging terrain, but since Irene, the area is also an obstacle course of blown-down trees. Michael did have enough equipment, though, to keep himself alive and moving.

I question Michael's decision to hike knowing that day's weather forecast. A solo foray along this ridge in the face of a windchill warning was overly risky. The route is a long and committing one with few bailouts, the daylight at that time of year is short, and the exposure is extreme. An added survival note: practicing methods for lighting a fire in snowy, cold, wet conditions seems worthwhile.

Note the cost of this search. NHFG tabbed it at \$10,147, and that does not include the cost of the helicopter. A friend of mine did some research on helicopter costs for me recently, and he offered that operating costs of \$2,000 per hour seemed a reasonable guess. Clearly, the extreme weather, with its short window for rescue, led NHFG to put many resources into this search. The state did not charge Michael for this rescue.

Allons y?

On December 7, at 3 P.M., NHFG got word through a 911 call of six hikers stuck at the 6-mile post on the Mount Washington Auto Road. They asked for help as they tried to walk down the road. The caller and group leader, Remy A., reported that members of his group had inadequate footgear and were suffering from the cold. Summit conditions at the time featured a temperature of 0 degrees F and sustained 50-MPH winds. NHFG Conservation Officer Mark Ober was unable to reach the party via phone. Ober then contacted Mount Washington State Parks Manager Mike Pelchat, who offered to drive one of their vehicles, outfitted with chains, up the road in search of the callers.

Ober and Pelchat departed from the base just after 4 P.M., and, at 4:40 P.M. at the road's 3-mile-mark, they met the six hikers descending at a good clip. The hikers expressed surprise at seeing their rescuers; the hikers were loaded into the vehicle and brought to the base and then to Pinkham Notch for warming and interviews.

Comment: I've chosen to provide the backstory to this incident here, because the decisions this group made before they set out offer almost all of the commentary needed.

Leader Remy and group members Joel D., Caroline G-B., Audrey R., Julien R., and Jean Philippe B., all in their mid-twenties, all from Quebec,

started up the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail at 7 A.M. on the 7th. They aimed to summit Mount Washington and descend via the Jewell Trail; their contingency plan was to ride the Cog Railway down if time or fatigue suggested it. The day's forecast from the observatory included a windchill advisory.

The group reached the summit at 2 P.M. The hike up had been slowed by icy conditions and the fact that some of the group had no traction devices or winter boots. Though Remy knew that late arrival would mean missing the train, in reality, that train was illusory. The railway's website advertised that although the cog ran until January 1, it had already stopped the full trip for the season. It was stopping at the halfway point.

The group believed that they would be able to find shelter from the windy, 0-degree temperatures and warmth at the summit buildings before beginning their descent; they were disconcerted when they found that they were not allowed into any buildings. (Summit buildings close when the conditions have led to curtailed Cog Railway trips and Auto Road closings.) Advised by a member of the observatory crew that the safest way down was the Auto Road, they set out. Slippery conditions and poor footwear slowed them, and as darkness threatened, they made their 3 P.M. call for help.

After the call, Remy decided to keep his group moving, and they slid down sections of the road on their rear ends. As they got lower, the wind decreased and they reached sections of road where passage of the observatory's summit vehicles had created better walking. Just after 4 P.M., they called 911 again to say they no longer needed rescue. Ober and Pelchat had already set out, though, and arrived some 40 minutes later and drove the group down the final miles of the Auto Road.

Ober interviewed the hikers and inventoried their packs at Pinkham Notch. Although a few were adequately equipped, others were not; most carried summer packs, and no one had sleeping bags or crampons.

In addition to the problems evident in the group's planning and preparation, I offer a few other thoughts: At some point in our winter uphill wanderings, we all learn that it is easier to climb into trouble than down from it. These hikers didn't take the traction devices needed for early winter and its coatings of ice, but they still could climb; when they turned to descend, however, anxiety took over.

That makes sense: Steps uphill are shorter and they land on the flexible front of the foot. Downhill, on the other hand, gravity stretches out our strides and we tend to land on our blocky heels. Also, when we stumble going up, we fall a shorter distance than when we fall going downhill. Ice compounds the difficulty of going down, making traction even more important.

This is an added anecdotal observation, but it seems to me that French is now the second language of the Whites because I notice our northern neighbors hiking in the Whites in increasing numbers. If this is so, might it make good sense for organizations that dispense information—weather, schedules, and so on—to offer that information in English and French? The report says that the group’s first language was French, and I conjecture that their planning might have been more accurate if they could have read information in French.

Finally, Ober concludes his report by recommending that the group be charged for their rescue. The amount—\$207.77—is tiny compared with many incidents, but assessing it makes good sense.²

Two Short Stories From King Ravine

Tuckerman and Huntington ravines take up much of the space in this column and in rescue reports. Increasingly, King Ravine’s name is cropping up, too. Here are two contrasting stories from its slopes and floor.

On December 21 at 7 A.M., having driven all night from Ontario, Rishi M. and Norman G. set out up the Valley Way with the aim of climbing Mount Adams and then descending to the Randolph Mountain Club’s Gray Knob Shelter for the night. The weather was mild with a forecast of incoming rain and ice. Rishi and Norman were well equipped for winter climbing. The pair reached Madison Spring Hut (which was closed for the season) at 11:30 A.M. and, given murky weather, decided to head straight for Gray Knob. During the traverse, however, they turned onto the King Ravine Trail, which they descended slowly, arriving at the boulder field on the ravine’s floor around 6:30 P.M. The men were using an old map that seemed not to include that trail. They felt uncertain of their location. In the darkness and feeling cramps and fatigue, they opted to stop and shelter in their bivy sacks and sleeping bags. At this time, Rishi decided to activate their SPOT locator beacon to

² NHFG may charge hikers for the cost of their rescues under the terms of a 2008 state law. The department reviews each incident and determines if the rescued parties were negligent. Negligence can mean hikers did not carry adequate gear for known conditions, did not consult weather reports, and tried a hike that was beyond their capabilities. The department rarely invokes the law and in some cases when it has, later it has dropped the fine. Search-and-rescue operations in New Hampshire continue to be funded by surcharges on all-terrain-vehicle and boat registrations and through the NHFG budget.—Editor.

summon help, hoping that someone would respond in the morning and help them find their way back to their car.

NHFG received a call about the SPOT activation around 6:45 P.M., and, after checking with the International Emergency Response Coordination Center (IERCC) in Houston, Texas, learned it was registered to Rishi. The IERCC dispatcher gave NHFG Conservation Officer Mark Ober the beacon's coordinates and contact information, but he was unable to get any answer to his call, and so he put a rescue in motion, summoning fellow conservation officers and three volunteers from AVSAR. By 9:30 P.M., three conservation officers and three AVSAR volunteers were en route to King Ravine. Throughout the night, IERCC phoned in updates saying the SPOT beacon was still stationary.

A little before midnight, Conservation Officer Bob Mancini made voice contact and then found Rishi and Norman partially in their bivy sacks and sleeping bags, camped on an exposed ridge in the boulder field. The men were cold and wet, but, after receiving warm clothes and fluids and food, they walked out with assistance to the parking lot at the Appalachia trailhead on Route 2, arriving at 3:30 A.M.

Comment: Buying good gear is as easy as finger-walking along the keyboard; gaining the experience needed to make good use of that gear takes time and some humility. That Rishi and Norman had not learned to make their gear work for them is evident from their positions when rescuers arrived: both men lay half out of their bivy sacks in an exposed place; instead of maintaining vital heat, they were giving it up. Our layers of gear are designed to make us self-reliant. Here, however, Rishi and Norman's gear simply allowed them to reach trouble, and then they used more gear (the SPOT locator) to drag others out into the night to retrieve them.

Ober's official report recommended charging Rishi and Norman the \$1,666.50 cost of the rescue. Good call from my point of view.

On April 7, Patrick L. left the Appalachia parking lot to ski the Great Gully in King Ravine. At 1 P.M., Patrick texted his mother that he was at the Chemin Des Dames Trail and heading up. At 10:15 P.M., NHFG received a call saying Patrick had not yet returned. State police verified that Patrick's car was still in the parking lot, and NHFG began to organize a search in the heavy rain. Conservation Officer Mark Ober began driving to Appalachia, but on the way he heard from the state police that Patrick had just arrived at his car. Ober soon arrived to find Patrick asleep in his car, and, when Ober tried to interview Patrick, Ober received terse or jumbled responses, among

them, “I lost my skis.” Ober called Gorham Emergency Medical Services for an ambulance. Ober also noted an AR-15 rifle in the car and asked if it was loaded, receiving only a head shake, “No.” Asked if he had other firearms, Patrick pointed to an empty handgun holster strapped to his right side; Ober ascertained that Patrick had lost his 9-mm handgun on the mountain.

The following morning, from his bed at Androscoggin Valley Hospital, Patrick reported more of the story to Ober. By 4 P.M. the previous day, Patrick had ascended to the 5,200-foot level and reached the edge of the Great Gully. He had skied the Gully before, but this time as he prepared to drop down, the snow beneath him broke loose, and he began to slide; he could not stop himself (his ice ax was torn from his hands). During his fall to the bottom of the Gully, he became airborne, dropped over several waterfalls, and hit rocks. He lost his skis, poles, ice ax, and sidearm. Once he slid to a stop, Patrick recognized where he was and crawled to a spot where he had gotten cell service in the past; his attempt was dropped after a few seconds, and he was unable to get service after that.

From that point, Patrick told Ober, he resolved to make it out on his own. He crawled and hobbled, using old ski tracks and occasional shafts of moonlight amid the rainfall to navigate approximately three miles over the next seven-plus hours, arriving finally at the Appalachia parking lot. His ski helmet was battered and had been crushed at the crown. An avid skier and racer, Patrick also said he was training to join the Army. After the interview, Patrick checked himself out of the hospital and drove home.

Comment: Patrick was clearly both resilient and lucky—after the bad luck of having his stance collapse atop the Great Gully. Luck does, at times, favor the prepared, and here that seems so. Without appropriate gear and knowledge of where he was, Patrick would likely have lost his life. His fall was a long, hazard-filled one where others have died recently. And, when luck turned against him at the base of the Gully, Patrick had the stamina and wherewithal to rescue himself. Contrast his story with the other King Ravine story in this column, and you can see opposite ends of the spectrum of backcountry venturers. Solo adventures always carry risk in difficult terrain, but I see going alone as a defensible choice *if* one is prepared and willing to accept consequences. Skiing the Great Gully during melt-out season surely is at the high end of the scale of risk.

Note that Patrick carried a gun. This should remind everyone to check our assumptions about who and what are at play in the backcountry. It also reminded me of the varied situations NHFG officers encounter as they do their work.

In the Heart of Winter

The winter's major incident occurred during a tempest on January 19. At 4:16 A.M. on Mount Washington's summit, the temperature was a (relatively) mild 9 degrees F and the winds whispered from the west at a coincident 9 miles per hour; light snow drifted in the air. The forecast should give anyone pause: "Increasing winds . . . kicked up snow . . . ground blizzards at times with whiteout conditions likely; in addition to high winds, cold arctic air will start to make a return today. A windchill advisory will go into effect at sunset today." This forecast echoed that of the previous day.

Pause was not taken, however. At 4:30 A.M., a group of fifteen hikers of varied experience from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania's Quest Program set out from Pinkham Notch for Mount Washington's summit. They divided into three groups as they ascended. Atop Lion Head, one group of five elected to turn back; the remaining two groups of six and four kept on, reaching the summit at 12:30 P.M. There, they took summit photos and turned to descend.

The group with Andrew S., Rhea M., Kelly S., and Wayne E., which included two of the overall group's four leaders, made very slow progress, in large measure because Wayne was struggling. A hiker of limited experience with no winter climbing background, Wayne was exhausted and unsteady; he fell often as the foursome climbed down the summit cone. Meanwhile, the morning forecast was coming true: the winds rose, picking up the loose snow, and vision and route-finding became difficult. Amid the blown snow, the group missed the turn for Lion Head, and not long after that, Andrew realized that they were heading for the lip of Tuckerman Ravine; from previous climbs on Washington, he knew this was not a descent they wanted to make. With Wayne struggling still, darkness coming, and the conditions making route-finding nearly impossible, around 4 P.M., Andrew punched the emergency button on his SPOT locator beacon; he followed that with a 911 call that got through. Then the link went dead. The group then hunkered down to shelter as best they could and await rescue. The temperature at the nearby summit was now -5 degrees F with sustained winds between 70 and 80 MPH.

U.S. Forest Service Snow Ranger Chris Joosen coordinated the rescue effort, gathering personnel from the U.S. Forest Service, Mountain Rescue Service, and NHFG. Because the current conditions and the forecast suggested that a night out could be lethal, Joosen launched a night rescue. He sent a party of four on snowmobiles to the head of the winter Lion Head Trail, where they would then climb toward the stranded party. Thirteen more

rescuers boarded New Hampshire State Park and Observatory Snow Cats and were driven up to the 6-mile post on the Mount Washington Auto Road; from there, the rescuers planned to follow the Alpine Garden Trail toward the coordinates provided by Andrew's SPOT beacon.

Though travel and coordination were exceedingly difficult, by around 9:30 P.M., rescuers had reached their target coordinates. Then, with winds still at hurricane force and vision limited by darkness and snow, they began a grid search. Approximately 45 minutes later, they found the four hikers. Wayne needed help; the other three were mobile. By 10:50 P.M., the group had begun the trek across the Alpine Garden to the waiting Snow Cats. A rotation of rescuers assisted Wayne, with one at each elbow throughout the crossing. A litter was ready should Wayne be unable to keep going. The group's progress was slow, but by 1:30 A.M., they had arrived at the safety of the Snow Cats. From there, they were driven to the base.

Comment: It is abundantly clear that the Quest group got itself into a predicament that could have killed some or all of the four left on the mountain at day's end. As is often true, it took a series of misjudgments and mistakes to arrive at the point where Andrew set off his SPOT beacon. Primary among them was taking a group of mixed experience and competence to Mount Washington in winter. Upper Washington is no learning mountain; it's a mountain to which you take your best knowledge and experience.

Add to this their failure to monitor the weather forecast, which offered consistent warning of tough stuff ahead. There's a reason that experienced climbers are among the weather obsessed. I draw a line of inference from the program's name to its behavior: quests often require suspension of usual caution, a stepping beyond; they summon the inner hero, who, in retrospect, often does silly things, and, once they are decided upon, they develop a momentum of their own. Not many people call off quests. That attitude is reflected also in the group's decision to turn around at 12:45 P.M., whether they had reached the summit or not. Though they reached the summit at 12:30, they left themselves only four hours to descend before sunset. An earlier turnaround time might have helped Wayne's group begin to climb down before trouble took over.

The group was reasonably well equipped, but much of the gear was rented and so unfamiliar to the hikers; again, this is no mountain on which to learn how to use gear. In a roaring whiteout, everything should be familiar to the touch. Finally, as underlining contrast to this commentary's advice, here is the lead paragraph to Quest's notice for this trip: "Join Quest on their

most thrilling adventure of the year. An ascent up Mount Washington in New Hampshire ‘home of the world’s worst weather.’ Four-day trip includes transportation to and from New Hampshire, motel rooms, and mountaineer training. **Most gear is included and no experience is necessary.**” (Their emphasis in bold.)

Once meteorological mayhem descended and the foursome was stuck, they endured well. Their decision to stick together probably helped save Wayne’s life, and it made them easier to find. Also, they probably bolstered each others’ spirits during the roughly six hours they waited for rescue.

A few notes about summoning rescue: Even the deeply experienced climbers who rescued the foursome were at the limits of possibility in these conditions. As the commentary on the invaluable Mount Washington Avalanche Center’s website makes clear, “had conditions deteriorated much further, rescue that night may not have been possible.”

During interviews, it also became clear that the group of six preceding the foursome down the mountain had also missed the turn for Lion Head Trail. Luckily, they happened on a climber who warned them away from Tuckerman Ravine Trail and set them back on the Lion Head route. Had they not met this climber, they would have descended into the steeps of the ravine on a day when avalanche danger was rated as high.

During some research, I also noticed a prominent posting on the Bloomsburg Quest website suggesting donations to organizations that assisted in this rescue. That’s a nice, appreciative gesture.

The Usual and the Not-So

Winter’s short hours and cold limit off-trail wandering, which, given its unpredictable nature, often requires the more elastic days of summer. Still, the appeal of untracked ground and unclimbed ice can be strong. Here, briefly, are a few wanderings that required help.

On January 18, three experienced ice climbers, Dale E., Lisa C., and Michelle R., followed a tip from the website New England Ice and went looking for an off-trail, frozen drainage in the Ammonoosuc Ravine. Leaving their inn in North Conway at 6 A.M., they climbed the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail to Gem Pool, where they diverged on a route to the iced-over drainage. They climbed on that ice until early afternoon. At that time, Dale opted not to climb a particular piece of steep ice and cut off into the woods to circumvent the ice and meet her partners at the top. Dale had trouble reaching her goal

and ended up out of contact with her partners and lost. When her attempt to cut across to the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail failed, and with light fading and cold intensifying, she called the inn where the climbers were staying for help. Steven H. called state police, who in turn notified NHFG.

Conservation Officer Mark Ober got a call through to Dale's cell phone. She told him she was cold and worried but said also that she was uninjured and had a headlamp. Ober plotted Dale's location from the earlier 911 call, and he and two fellow officers drove to the trailhead, where they met three more conservation officers at 8:45 P.M. At 9:30, the team fielded another call from Dale, and that enabled them to aim for the place near Gem Pool where the climbers had gone off-trail earlier that day. A little after 10 P.M., three officers found Dale, and a few minutes later located her two partners who had just called for help when their single headlamp failed.

Comment: A group becoming separated is a familiar woods story. "I'll just go around this rise and meet you at the top," one of us might say, and then the terrain begins to nudge us this way and that. In a little while, we're disoriented and deep in the trees without perspective. Two thoughts: The NHFG report makes no mention of a map; surely one might have been helpful, especially if the climbers had studied it carefully the night before. Although such study won't forestall the disoriented feeling described, it can provide a mental overview that helps limit the lost feeling. A compass to go with the map is vital. Also, in winter, when the I'm-getting-off-track feeling arrives, there is the option of retracing one's steps or prints.

Although Dale had all the gear needed for ice-climbing, she carried no survival gear (aside from her headlamp). Once lost with dark coming on, she was not prepared to ride out the night and rescue herself. Ober notes this in his report, and he concludes that the rescued climber should pay the cost of the rescue. I concur.

On December 12 at 3 A.M., NHFG received a call about a missing hiker in the Franconia Notch area. David E., a Lyndon State College student, had left school to hike and climb in that area the day before. He was reported to be well equipped. David had told his roommate his intended route, so NHFG officers decided to give him time to hike out on his own. It was a very cold morning (on Mount Washington at 5:17 A.M., the thermometer read -15 with a 73-MPH wind, and a windchill advisory was in effect). With no sign of David, NHFG organized a search, which would necessarily be broad and people intensive. At 12:30 P.M., as the search was getting under way, NHFG

learned that hikers on the Falling Waters Trail had come across David not far from the summit of Little Haystack.

NHFG believed that David's condition merited an airlift off the ridge by a National Guard helicopter. He was treated for mild hypothermia at a local hospital. In an interview with NHFG, David said that he had begun his climb on the Falling Waters Trail at 9 A.M. on the 11th, diverging later to climb an off-trail drainage called Lincoln's Throat; eventually, he lost his way and spent the night in his sleeping bag wrapped in a space blanket and tarp. In the morning, he found his way to Falling Waters Trail. When rescuers found him, he carried no pack or gear, saying he must have lost them.

Comment: Zow. This barebones report asks for more detail, but even at this level, it's clear that David broke nearly every safety "rule." He was equipped with cold-weather gear, and, according to his mother in media reports, he had Wilderness First Responder training. The only mystery to me is that the reporting officer from NHFG did not recommend billing him the \$4,518.57 cost of this rescue, a figure that omits the cost of the helicopter (as I noted earlier, helicopters may cost \$2,000 an hour).

Trouble in the Shoulder Season: A Ridge Too Far

Misjudgment tends to gather in the "shoulder seasons," those margins where one season gives way to another. Often then, the disparity between backyard or valley conditions and those in the uplands is extreme. Here's a short story from when winter gave way to spring; it strays into May, a little beyond the usual cutoff date for winter stories.

On May 4, at 5 A.M., David H., age 75, carrying food and clothing for a summer day hike, set off from Crawford Notch, bound ultimately for Lincoln Woods via Zealand Mountain, the Bonds, and the Lincoln Woods Trail, a distance of 21.2 miles by trail. He was tracing the footsteps of a relative who had made that crossing the previous August. The forecast spoke of intermittent rain, with snow possible at higher elevations. He reached Zealand Falls Hut at 10 A.M., paused, then headed into the upland traverse of his route, where he encountered a good deal of snow and ice. David summited Mount Guyot at 5 P.M. and kept on from there, arriving on Mount Bond at around 7 P.M. Between Bond and Bondcliff, in the rain and fog and darkness, he became uncertain of the trail; at 9:30 P.M. he called 911.

After finally pinpointing David's location, NHFG sent two conservation officers from Lincoln Woods on four-wheelers at 3:30 A.M. At the base of

the Bondcliff Trail, the officers got off the machines and continued on foot, climbing the 4.4 miles over Bondcliff. They found David a little before 11 A.M. just beyond its summit. He was cold, wet, and tired, and the officers figured it would take all day and, perhaps, into the evening to walk David out. At this point, an Army National Guard helicopter on standby was summoned, and the officers walked David down below the 3,000-foot elevation, where the helicopter crew was able to use its “jungle penetrator” to lift him and the officers from the woods. Lt. James Kneeland, the NHFG officer in charge of this rescue, recommended that David be charged for the cost of this rescue.

Comment: Even this sketch points out the obvious missteps David took on his way to trouble. Key among them is using an August hike as a template for one in early May, when conditions are still like winter in the high Whites. One must pack and dress for winter then. In all seasons, each of us should have a contingency plan that allows us to adjust to what we find while walking.

I suspect that David was dealing with a second shoulder season—his age, 75—and that in making this crossing, he hoped to point out (to self? to others?) that that season hasn’t taken hold just yet. I am not far behind him in age and a kindred spirit (I’m guessing), and I suspect also that as we keep on into the hills, our toughest management project will be our own fantasies and expectations. That David is deeply experienced as a hiker—news reports tab him as having completed both the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails—points out just how strong is the internal imperative to shake free from aging’s gravity.

Carry This Card?

Beginning on January 1, 2015, hikers in New Hampshire may purchase a card—\$25 for individuals, \$35 for a family—that frees them from the cost of a rescue if they are found to have been negligent incurring that rescue. The fund established by revenue from this voluntary purchase will be used to support NHFG’s search-and-rescue costs, which consistently run \$200,000 or more over budget. Lawmakers and NHFG officials also hope this money supplements what the state tries to collect when hikers are deemed negligent in precipitating a rescue effort. As I have noted, recommendations that the state seek such reimbursement are growing more common, but actually collecting the fees has proven difficult, in no small measure because proving negligence in court can be hard and costly.

Will I buy this card? I think I will, simply as a way of making a targeted contribution to NHFG's search-and-rescue efforts. Will you?

An Archetype That Needs to Go Away

Here's a final note about a rescue that didn't happen; its story, however, was broadly read because it appeared as a feature in the *Boston Globe's* magazine.

On February 15, Eric Mazur, age 59, led a group of four graduate students and a fellow professor into Zealand Falls Hut, where they stayed for the night. Their plan for the 16th was to ski roughly 15 miles from Zealand to Lincoln Woods via the Shoal Pond and Wilderness trails. The Mount Washington Observatory had posted a windchill advisory that was to give way to a windchill warning at noon; the tagline on the forecast warned about how difficult conditions would make any search and rescues in the Whites that day. At 4:26 A.M., it was -4 degrees F with 70-MPH winds atop Mount Washington.

Downed trees across the trail slowed them, as did brook crossings. As late afternoon came on, they had only reached Stillwater Junction, and they were cold. Mazur's boots had iced over, and he knew they were in trouble. The group was split on what to do: two wanted to go back to Zealand; two wanted to try to construct snow shelters; two wanted to go on. Eventually, they went on toward Lincoln Woods, emerging finally in straggling succession in the early morning hours. Mazur sustained serious frostbite, and as of the May article's writing, still was using open-toed footwear.

What got my attention beyond the group's overextension was former *Boston Globe* columnist Bella English's article, published May 23, 2014. It was light on specifics and a sense of the geography and terrain and what winter in the Pemigewasset Wilderness can require. But the article was long on the archetype of man versus nature, with victory going finally to the indomitable spirit of man. Really? What facts I piece together point instead to a dopey overextension in the face of extreme cold. Such writing celebrates a characteristic that needs no reinforcement.

—Sandy Stott
Accidents Editor

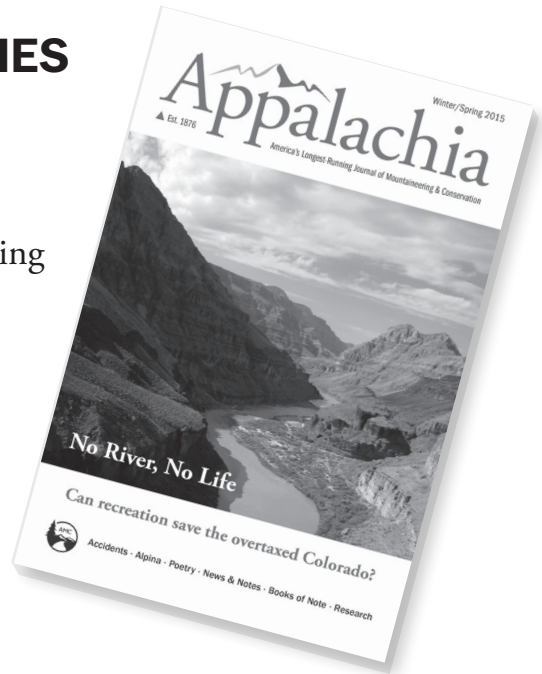
Editor's note: Last winter's NHFG reports omitted ages in several instances. Where possible, we added ages found in other media.

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