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Accidents

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

Upright

There is, embedded in the raw file of incident summaries from which we drew the sampling that became this column, a reminder of one of the many subdivisions in our world. Although every age group suffers from slips and falls in the backcountry, rescues stemming from them are weighted toward the 65-and-over cohort. No surprise there. Even before the pandemic encouraged a new boom in walking and hiking, aging boomers (and I am one) were keeping on along the trails. “Seventy is the new (fill in your own fantasy age)” might be a boomer tattoo, if time would only hold still and the flesh were willing.

Perhaps a short look at a few slippage factors will make us all, whatever our ages, a little more mindful of balance and risks to it when we walk out and up.

Walking—as anyone who’s taken a tumble will testify—is all about balance. Often those moments when we fall are etched in memory, attached to feelings that can be called back too. (See, for example, Rob Z.’s accident on the South Trip pyramid slide in the Winter/Spring 2022 issue.)

Our balance “system,” like much we take for granted, is remarkably complex, partly because it must carry us through so many different circumstances—varied angles, speeds, levels of light, and so on—and still get it right. The American Physical Therapy Association website puts it this way:

Good balance depends on:

1. Correct sensory information from your eyes (**visual system**), muscles, tendons, and joints (**proprioceptive input**), and the balance organs in the inner ear (**vestibular system**).
2. The **brain stem** making sense of all this sensory information in combination with other parts of the brain.
3. Movement of your eyes to keep objects in your vision stable and keep your balance (**motor output**).

Starting in middle age, parts of our balance systems may lose some of their fine tuning. This too is common sense, and it's borne out by our experiences on trails, where a stony stretch that once was a quick-stepping puzzle asks a more deliberate solving. Still, simple awareness of balance's slow decline can help us compensate and keep on going up . . . and down. Chief among our balancing tools is fitness. Maintaining strength and cardio fitness helps keep us from the sloppy footing (and thinking) that comes on when we tire. When we're fit, we also tend not to pack on pounds that make us unwieldy. Finally, the fit tend to greater awareness of how their bodies are moving, so whatever decline is at hand is also likely to have been noticed.

Hiking poles, with their added points of balance, are also a common, helpful addition (even as they ask for a heightened awareness of their effects—widening trails and scarring rocks). Then too, there is the point where the tread meets the trail.

Sole Thoughts: We've noted this before, but it bears reminder: When we go to choose footwear for the mountains, we find a remarkable range of boots, half-boots, trail shoes, running shoes, and trail-hybrids; scrolling through outdoor store ads lengthens this list to a paragraph. Two imperatives seem centrally touted: weight and grip (with "support" also common). *Grip* is the key descriptor, and whenever setting out in a new pair of trail shoes, we use the first trips as tests of traction. This shows when new soles will hold and also how they land. As you and the shoes age together—the shoes more quickly, you more slowly, we hope—you become a team, and as you "read" the trail ahead, you know where your soles will hold and where risk lies.

All this is, of course, common sense, but it is worth returning the common to consciousness from time to time.

—Sandy Stott
Accidents Editor

Looped

May 19, 2021, saw a flurry of three calls issue from the Franconia Range. Often when rescues arrive in multiples, gnarly weather is involved, but the 19th was mild and relatively calm for this shoulder season. Temperatures atop Mount Washington averaged 7 degrees above the norm of 38, and the sun shone 84 percent of the time. Still, as the day aged, it grew more and more difficult for Cal Z., age 20, who by then was off-trail and alone in the vicinity of Mount Garfield. The call for help reached New Hampshire Fish and Game

Conservation Officer Heidi Murphy at 10:15 A.M. The caller said that he and his three companions had not seen Cal since 9 P.M. on the 18th. Murphy set a search in motion.

Having just driven in from Indiana and being new to the White Mountains, Cal and his four twentysomething friends had embarked on a multiday rounding of the iconic Pemigewasset Wilderness route known as the Pemi Loop. They left the trailhead at Lincoln Woods on the morning of May 17 and climbed the Osseo Trail to the ridgeline. The group spent the first night between Mounts Flume and Liberty, setting out early on the 18th for the climb up and over Mount Lafayette. Atop Lafayette, the four friends waited for a half hour for Cal to arrive. According to the group's unofficial leader, Jack S., Cal had been lagging and feeling negative about the hike. From Lafayette's summit the group descended the Garfield Ridge Trail, with three of them arriving finally at a spot just off the trail near Garfield Pond, where they decided to camp for the night. It was then around 8:30 P.M.

Throughout this descent Cal had continued struggling, and by 9 P.M., he and his brother Cy had not arrived at the campsite. His companions went back to help, relieving Cal of his pack, giving him a light, and encouraging him on. Jack estimated that they were about a quarter-mile from the campsite. Then, the group went on ahead again. Cy arrived, night fell, but Cal didn't appear.

At the campsite, the foursome cooked and ate dinner, listening also to music. They called out into the woods for Cal but got no response; they then decided that they would look for Cal in the morning. Their morning search turned up no sign of Cal, and around 10 A.M., they made their call for help.

Murphy's search for Cal on the 19th sent fellow COs up the Osseo Trail, the Greenleaf Trail, and the Skookumchuk Trail to check whether Cal might have turned back. Two of the officers were then diverted to another incident, and CO Josiah Towne continued from the Skookumchuk to Lafayette's summit, then back down to the Garfield Ridge Trail, where he met up with the four hikers. Towne escorted the party down the Skookumchuk.

Meanwhile, Murphy drove to the trailhead lots for the Lincoln Woods, Falling Waters, Skookumchuk, Garfield, and Galehead Trails. At each, she talked with hikers, explaining the situation and offering a description of Cal. At 7:15 P.M. Murphy received word of a call from Catherine C., who said that she had found Cal that evening at the Garfield Ridge Campsite and that, upon determining his name, decided to call. Catherine said that Cal could stay with her and her hiking partner for the evening, and she hoped that someone would retrieve Cal the next day so that they could continue their hike.

Murphy then returned to meet with the four hikers at around 8:45 P.M. and explained that they would need to hike to the campsite and bring Cal back out the next day. They agreed and, a little after 3 P.M. on the 20th, Murphy heard that the group had accomplished this.

That evening Murphy interviewed Cal on the phone and learned his story of his time missing. Cal's description of his night alone in the woods on the side of Mount Garfield reads like an otherscape. Cal had a light, but no gear, and he "didn't know what he's doing." He did hear yelling for him, and he yelled back but no one seemed to hear him. He thought the yelling came from a place he'd already been by, but he didn't try to go back because he didn't want "to get more lost or hurt." He thought it was after midnight when he fell asleep beneath a large tree. When he awoke in the morning, Cal went first downhill, then turned and climbed back up, arriving finally at the Garfield Ridge Campsite where he spent much of the day. Late in the afternoon he walked up the trail toward Garfield's summit and on the way met Catherine, who asked if his name was Cal. Catherine and her companion then guided Cal back to the campsite, gave him food and water, called NHFG, and made a plan to shelter him for the night.

Comment: CO Murphy's official report hews close to the facts as gleaned from interviews and it is plainspoken. But it contains description of a remarkable failure in group dynamics. The group's pace over the two initial days of their hike and their noting how tired Cal seemed suggests a slow shakeout after their 1,100-mile drive from Indiana. That three of them went ahead to set up camp as they neared Garfield Pond is typical of a group with fatigued members. That they chose to camp where it is not officially sanctioned also points to their unfamiliarity with, and perhaps a lack of research into, their route

But from that point on, it's hard to fathom their response. After they returned to Cal and Cy to help them over the last short distance by shouldering their packs, the three then left the brothers again. Cy then left Cal. And in this short distance and time, Cal seemingly vanished. Still, the other four made dinner, listened to their music, and called out into the woods for Cal. Then, they made the inexplicable decision to turn in and wait until morning. That left Cal in the woods without his sleeping bag or any other supplies. Even with the good weather on the 18th, that's a chilly evening at 4,000 feet.

When their morning search along the Garfield Ridge Trail yielded no sign of Cal, they called for help. And then, as help arrived, they walked down from the ridge. This left Cal somewhere on Mount Garfield, possibly for another

night. That Murphy's alerts to hikers that Cal was missing helped bring Catherine to Cal's rescue was a piece of good fortune for Cal and the group. Yes, they climbed back to get Cal the next day, but should they ever have left?

Two final thoughts: Splitting up, especially when a group member is deeply tired, is a bad idea, even when a campsite is near. But such decision-making is common among groups that have no agreed-upon leader. Going into the backcountry as a group asks that group structure be determined before hitting the trail. Many of us have experienced how easy it is to get off-trail and lost even in short stretches of our mountains. Once lost, it's also easy to land in Cal's state of mind where one "doesn't know what he's doing."

Tragic Tree

On May 26, 2021, at 9:15 P.M., NHFG received a call from Angela M. saying that her husband, Edward M., age 50, was four hours overdue from a three-day hike on the Carter Range and in the Wild River valley. Edward's itinerary had him climbing up from the Bog Brook Trail to Carter Dome, then along the Carter Range to Mount Moriah, from there looping down the Kenduskeag and Shelburne Trails to the Highwater Trail and Wild River Trail, through Perkins Notch, and back to his car. An ambitious 34-mile backpack, but one within Edward's capabilities as he sought to complete his New Hampshire 4,000-footers.

NHFG Lt. Mark Ober returned the call and learned Edward's intended route and his progress until noon on the 25th, when Edward had posted a picture of himself atop Mount Moriah on his Facebook page. Ober calculated the miles of Edward's intended route and thought that, given only 2.3 miles covered on the morning of the 25th, he might simply be behind schedule. He suggested that they wait until the 27th before starting a search. Ober asked that Angela let him know if Edward had not emerged by noon on the 27th.

On the 27th at noon Angela called saying that she'd still not heard from Edward, and Ober summoned COs to begin a sweep of Edward's intended route. By early evening the COs had covered much of the intended route without sign of Edward. Ober then called Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue to ask for volunteers to cover the Kenduskeag Trail to its juncture with the Shelburne Trail. While he awaited response to this request, Ober heard a garbled report issuing from CO Matt Holmes, who had been assigned the Highwater Trail as it ran south to the Wild River Trail. Holmes tried again a little later, and at around 7:30 P.M. New Hampshire State Police called Ober,

reporting that COs Holmes and Levi Frye had found Edward dead at the Spruce Brook Tentsite.

Ober then shifted the mission to recovery and to figuring out what had happened to Edward. He contacted medical examiner Sally Zankowski, and, after Ober described the location, she gave permission to retrieve Edward's body provided that the scene was fully documented by photographs. The COs, now four in number, did so, and then they packed up Edward's gear and readied his body for pickup by a New Hampshire Army National Guard helicopter. The Black Hawk helicopter arrived at around 9 p.m. and transported Edward's body to Berlin, where Zankowski and Ober conducted an examination to determine how Edward had died. That examination and photos and descriptions from the COs who found Edward pointed to a freak tragedy. It was clear he had died from trauma when a tree fell on him, almost certainly on the 26th. What seemed likely is that Edward had pulled into the tentsite late after a long day and begun to set up camp. That setup included his sleeping hammock, which he strung between two trees, one of which was a dead spruce. When Edward put his weight on the hammock, it broke the dead spruce off at the base, and the body of the tree fell on Edward, killing him. When the COs arrived, they found Edward beneath the tree.

One further bit of evidence solidified Zankowski and Ober's assessment: Angela was able to open Edward's phone, and it had a short video clip of the tentsite when Edward arrived. The clip was taken at 7:58 p.m. Ober then speculated that Edward had arrived at or after dark and set about making camp. He would have traveled 12 miles that afternoon and was likely tired. That it was after dark was clear also from Edward's having a headlamp on when he was found. It's likely that he didn't recognize the hazard of the dead tree in the dark, and when he sat on the hammock, the tree fell on him.

Comment: Primary to what I have to say here is an expression of sadness and condolences. To Edward's family first, of course, and then to those who responded and helped bring Edward out.

Sleeping hammocks are more and more popular in a variety of settings; checking the trees to which they are strung is a good reminder to self. Trees don't figure near the top of a hiking worry-list, but an awareness of what's above seems good practice, especially when you plan to stay in one spot for some time. Our eastern trees, often given stony soil for nutrients and grip, seem—if you survey the wreckage of our woodlands—a little more prone to shedding and falling than some of their more well-founded cousins in other regions.

In Deep

An evening call on July 28, 2021, alerted NHFG Lt. Ober that 59-year-old Nancy B. was overdue at Lakes of the Clouds Hut. Nancy and her son David R. had set out from Madison Spring Hut at 8:30 that morning with a plan to hike separately and meet at Edmands Col before continuing on to Lakes. David would climb the Star Lake Trail up Mount Adams and descend to the col, while Nancy would take the Gulfside Trail. The pair set out together on the Star Lake Trail, and beyond the lake, where the trail diverges and aims for Mount Adams, Nancy went left on a trail that she identified as the Gulfside Trail. David questioned the choice, but Nancy had an Appalachian Mountain Club map and had hiked in the Whites before, so he assumed she was right. An experienced hiker who knew she needed to keep her blood sugar balanced, Nancy had set out with pack full of lunch, energy bars, and minimal overnight gear.

After waiting some time at Edmands Col, David got a text from his mother saying that she was OK but moving slowly. Another text at 11:30 A.M. asked that he come back and join her so she wouldn't be hiking alone. David left his pack at the col and tracked back along the Gulfside Trail toward Madison Spring Hut. For the next three and a half hours David searched back and forth along the trail, asking others he met if they'd seen anyone who matched his mother's description. She didn't answer his texts, and he assumed her phone battery had died. At 3 P.M. David returned to the Madison hut and asked the crew for help. During a break from their prep for the night's guests, some of the crew walked with David to where David had parted from his mother that morning; instantly, they knew she'd taken the Buttress Trail, apparently not seeing the small sign marking it. Very steep and difficult, the Buttress Trail also leads down into the Great Gulf Wilderness.

The Madison crew had to decide about an impending search while operating under the significant pressure of dealing with David's worry about his mother—and serving dinner to a full group of guests. They consulted AMC's on-call search-and-rescue coordinator at Pinkham Notch Visitor Center and learned that a team would not be coming until the next morning. The hut crew made the decision to send two of their members down the Buttress Trail to look for Nancy. (Though all AMC hut crew members have basic SAR training, they operate on an "at-will" basis during rescues, not as a formal SAR team.) Knowing that Nancy needed regular access to food and not knowing how long her supply would last, the crew felt (in the assistant hutmaster's words) "like there was a very strict time limit on the search, and we were the only ones" prepared to go out. The responsibility fell to them.

As darkness covered the Presidentials, the two crew members descended the Buttress Trail. Some seven-tenths of a mile down from the Star Lake Trail junction, their headlamps picked out a cell phone lying in the trail. They quickly confirmed the phone was Nancy's. Lower down, where the Buttress Trail crosses an open talus slope, the searchers spotted a blinking red light. Estimating the light to be at about 4,000 feet of elevation, the crew members guessed that Nancy had started up the Six Husbands Trail to return to the ridge, but after searching Six Husbands up to 4,500 feet, they found no sign of Nancy or the blinking light. As they returned to the hut via the Buttress Trail after more than eight hours of peering into the darkness, the searchers shouted Nancy's name repeatedly but guessed that the rushing water and dense vegetation of Jefferson Ravine muffled their voices.

On the morning of July 29, Ober set up a search command at Pinkham Notch. There, he learned of the light the searchers had seen on either the Six Husbands or Wamsutta Trails and that they'd found no one there. Fortunately, the weather was mostly benign with light winds, although cooler than normal—the temperatures for the 28th and 29th averaged 6 degrees below the norm of 50 atop Mount Washington.

AMC offered two teams, and Ober deployed them to search two trail loops: first, Gulfside, Great Gulf, and Wamsutta Trails; second, Gulfside, Sphinx, Great Gulf, and Six Husbands Trails. He also contacted AVSAR's Mike Pelchat and Diane Holmes, who volunteered to search the Chandler Brook, Great Gulf, and Madison Gulf Trails loop. Ober then drove to the summit building on Mount Washington to provide searchers and summit staff with a photo of Nancy they could show to hikers.

Earlier, Ober had also asked David to walk down from Madison Spring Hut so Ober could review more details of the pair's planned hike. He picked David up at the Appalachia parking area and drove back to Pinkham, filling David in on search details as he drove. From an interview conducted at Pinkham, Ober learned David's story from the 28th, and important facts about Nancy's hiking experience (some, but not as ambitious as their current plan) and equipment (equipped with enough gear and supplies for one or more nights out). David was also certain that his mother would not try to climb back up the Buttress Trail once she realized her error; he thought she would try to walk out on the Great Gulf Trail.

By 3 P.M. all the search teams had completed their loops, finding no sign of Nancy. Ober made plans to expand the search, summoning three COs with extra COs and NHANG's Black Hawk helicopter on standby. As the

three COs were about to start their searches, Ober received a call saying that two hikers had found Nancy on the lower part of the Sphinx Trail. One hiker would stay with Nancy and hike slowly out, while the other was already on his way out to get help. Over the next few hours, Ober positioned COs and an all-terrain vehicle nearby, and over time COs and David arrived to help walk Nancy to the ATV. By just after 6 P.M. everyone was out, and Ober had a chance to interview Nancy and learn what had happened.

Nancy said she thought something was off when she kept descending. She checked her map then and realized she was on the Buttress Trail. She told Ober, "There was no way I was going back uphill, so I was trying to get to the Great Gulf Trail and hike out." Where the Six Husbands Trail meets the Wamsutta Trail, Nancy got off track trying to find the Great Gulf Trail. The going grew thick and scrubby, and somehow Nancy lost her map. As it grew dark, she stopped, got out her blanket and wrapped up for the night. During the night she thought she saw lights and flashed her headlamp in response, but nothing came of it. When daylight returned, she kept moving, keeping the West Branch of the Peabody River on her left, but she was still off-trail. In mid-afternoon, she finally saw a cairn, and, as she neared it, the hikers who rescued her appeared.

Comment: While Nancy proved resilient in her attempt to remedy her initial trail-finding error, her mistake occasions a thought about maps. I am a fan of paper maps and the context they provide, and Nancy was equipped with one of the best. But to be useful, maps must be read fully (read, studied) and synched with the terrain they describe. A careful check of their day's planned routes on the 28th would have told Nancy and David that as they emerged from Madison Spring Hut, Nancy's intended route, the Gulfside Trail, ran up the slope to the right, while David's Star Lake Trail tracked to its left, up toward the col between Mount Madison and Mount John Quincy Adams. To keep to their plans, they needed to separate right near the hut. As they walked companionably up the Star Lake Trail, they were already in trouble. By the time an alarm went off for Nancy, she was already partway down one of the hardest trails in the range, where she didn't feel capable of reversing herself.

That, over time, Nancy also lost her phone and then her map is unfortunate, but not surprising. Being lost, especially off-trail, has a way of stripping you of your composure and equipment; that Nancy keep her composure is to her credit. Even as she was never far from a trail in the heavily peopled July Whites, Nancy's experience would have felt increasingly singular and isolated. She did well to keep trying.

Nancy was not the only hiker this past summer to find herself barred from the Presidential ridge by the steep walls that guard the exit from the Great Gulf Wilderness. The Buttress, Six Husbands, and Madison Gulf Trails are some of the most notorious paths in the range for a reason, and hikers should only consider them if they are confident on minimally marked trails that involve steep scrambles over wet rocks and roots. The Madison Spring Hut crew dealt with nearly a dozen incidents of hikers who became stranded, disoriented, or injured while coming to the hut via the Madison Gulf Trail, which involves many unmarked river crossings and a quarter-mile headwall section involving some Class 4 rock climbing and crossing through what is at times a running waterfall.

Visitors' Tales

Here are two stories of trouble on Mount Washington. Each describes a way in which the seemingly modest Whites can surprise those who don't know them.

At Altitude. At 6 P.M. on July 28, 2021, Victor J., age 49, and his cousin Joseph left the Appalachia trailhead parking area to begin a Presidential Traverse in celebration of Joseph's 40th birthday. Victor had flown in from Utah, where the mountains comb the sky. The pair spent the night at the Valley Way Tentsite and in the morning climbed Mount Madison and then on over Mount Adams, dropping then down to Edmonds Col. On Mount Jefferson's summit cone, Victor slipped and injured his ankle. After a short assessment rest, they decided to abandon their traverse, and Victor hobbled down to the Gulfside Trail. As the day waned, the pair stopped and set up their tent near Sphinx Col, about two miles from the Mount Washington summit.

The forecast for 30th was not promising—cold rain, with rising wind. Victor and Joseph knew of the rain, but the wind later surprised them. The pair spent that day pinned down in their tent by the weather and Victor's injured ankle. During the afternoon the wind rose and broke one of their tent poles, collapsing the tent. After 4 P.M., Victor texted his sister in New Mexico, saying that he would need a rescue; his brother-in-law in turn called Mount Washington State Park requesting help and giving Victor's coordinates. That information was forwarded to NHFG, and at 5 P.M. Lt. Ober began a response, texting and calling Victor's number with no answer. Then Ober turned to the AMC and asked that they try sending some of the crew from Lakes of the Clouds Hut to help Victor and Joseph and assess the situation.

At around 6 P.M., AMC's SAR coordinator called Ober saying the high winds and heavy rain had turned the searchers back. When Ober checked the observatory website again, the winds were sustained at 55 MPH and gusting to 77; windchills were predicted to drop into the teens.

Ober then called Victor's brother-in-law in New Mexico and learned that Victor and Joseph were well equipped and were trying to shelter for the night. Ober let the brother-in-law know that he wasn't going to send rescuers into this stormy night. Ober then got a text from Victor saying, "Cannot walk well enough to get to Sphinx Trail. We are just off Gulfside. Tent was coming apart in winds so moved 20 yards north down off trail. . . . Hopefully sense of humor and what we have will be enough. Have a feeling it is going to be a cold night. Hopefully we'll see you in the morning." After one more text exchange, Victor and Joseph settled in partially shielded by a boulder to endure the night.

July 31 dawned with the observatory recording a temperature of 32, sustained winds of 53 MPH with gusts to 75, and 50 feet of visibility. Ober arrived at the Mount Washington Auto Road at 6 A.M. and learned that a rescue crew from AMC's Lakes of the Clouds had left to reach Victor and Joseph a few minutes earlier. At 8 A.M. volunteers from AVSAR and four NHFG COs set out from the Auto Road. Via radio, they and the Auto Road rescue crew learned that the AMC rescuers had reached Victor and Joseph with warm, dry clothing.

At a little after 9:30 A.M. AVSAR's rescuers arrived, and emergency medical technician Mike Pelchat evaluated Victor's ankle, then taped it and began an attempt to walk him out. Joined by the COs, who had spotted ATVs as close as they could, the rescuers made steady, albeit slow, progress. Around noon, as they reached the Cog Railway track, a train chugged up; Pelchat stopped the train and asked for help. The conductor then took Victor and Pelchat on board for the final steep climb to the summit. Everyone else followed by trail.

Comment: It's of note that this incident took place right after Nancy B.'s venture described earlier ("In Deep"), and in that short span the weather shifted from benign summer to threatening chill. Victor and Joseph's overnight in a driving storm on the 30th would have been life-threatening had they not been well equipped, fit, and determined.

Slips are the most common source of injury, and when the injury feels severe, it can take the assessment, reassurance, and assistance of a skilled rescue team to get someone moving again. That AMC, AVSAR, and NHFG were able to offer that help got Victor up and moving slowly toward safety. Getting a ride for last half-mile on the Cog Railway was good fortune for all.

In an interview with Ober, Victor said, “I came here thinking that my house is at higher altitude than these mountains.” He allowed that he hadn’t expected the Whites to be such tough mountains.

Into the Wilderness. A few days later, and not far from where Victor and Joseph endured their storm, Jimmy Doug S., age 66, of Whitney, Texas, found his own brand of trouble. At 9:30 A.M. on August 3, Jimmy Doug set out from the 2-mile marker on the Auto Road with a plan to follow the Appalachian Trail to Mount Washington’s summit, where his wife would pick him up. At the first junction, rather than following the AT to the Osgood Trail and then climbing over Mount Madison, he saw a sign saying “Mt. Washington” and thought, *That’s where I’m going.* This set Jimmy Doug on the Great Gulf Trail, which also leads to Mount Washington. He said later that his Guthook hiking app (since then, aptly for this incident, renamed FarOut) didn’t advise him differently. Jimmy Doug headed into the Great Gulf Wilderness.

The Wilderness is, by intent, not heavily signed, and Jimmy Doug later complained about this. Still, he kept using his Guthook app and working deeper into the Great Gulf. As the day began to wane, he had reached the headwall, and his reading of his app sent him up. At some point on the headwall, Jimmy Doug got off trail, and the sharply angled terrain slowed him. Darkness came on.

Jimmy Doug was to meet his wife, Katie, atop Washington. Now he texted her that he was stuck, afraid to go up or down and without a light; she called 911. When NHFG CO Sgt. Glen Lucas spoke with Katie, she explained the day’s plan and said that Jimmy Doug was stuck and had poor reception. Lucas plotted his coordinates, which placed Jimmy Doug on the Gulfside Trail, but Katie was unable to hike down with a light and couldn’t get someone else to do it. After looking at the weather (a mild forecast with no rain), Lucas advised both Katie and Jimmy Doug that he “found no reason to call out a rescue team when the only issue was his not having a light.” Both said they understood, and Jimmy Doug prepared to sit out the night in his poncho.

Lucas got a 7 A.M. call from the State Police saying that an emergency beacon had been activated near where Jimmy Doug had been during the night. These coordinates came from the headwall north of the Gulfside Trail. Lucas headed for the Auto Road, summoning CO Eric Fluette to join him. While the COs drove, Lucas asked Mount Washington State Park (MWSP) to send someone down to the coordinates from last evening, and they agreed. The employee found no one on the Gulfside Trail.

Atop Washington, Lucas sent Fluette down toward the Gulfside Trail and put in a call to AVSAR, as the morning coordinates indicated Jimmy Doug was on a cliff. AVSAR's Pelchat said he would start their way with technical help in case it was needed. Then, Lucas followed Fluette down toward the headwall. Fluette and the MWSP employee looked for a route out to the coordinates, and Fluette began to call out for Jimmy Doug. Getting an answer, Fluette then worked out a way to reach Jimmy Doug and then guide him off the headwall to the Great Gulf Trail.

Comment: CO Lucas recommended that Jimmy Doug be billed for the cost of his rescue. This is no surprise. Not having a light or a map won't get you much sympathy in the rescue community. Relying on a phone app that



New Hampshire Fish and Game Conservation Officer Eric Fluette, on the right, rescues Jimmy Doug S. on the headwall of the Great Gulf on August 3, 2021. NHFG/SGT. GLEN LUCAS

provides little context leads often to route-finding trouble. Perhaps it is true in this region that all trails lead to Mount Washington, but the terrain they pass over varies wildly. A paper map illuminates that variety. Also, Jimmy Doug's intended route over Mounts Madison, Adams, Jefferson, and Clay asked for more than he had to offer.

I leave the final word on this incident to Jimmy Doug's wife, Katie. She was listening as Jimmy Doug disagreed with CO Lucas's analysis that part of his trouble on the headwall stemmed from not having a map. Jimmy Doug kept extolling his Guthook hiking app, saying, "It works great for me." Katie looked over and said, "How did that work out for you?"

Baby, You Can Drive My Car

On the morning of August 31, Philip P., age 71, and his daughter Megan C., age 43, set out to walk up the Mount Washington Auto Road. On learning that walking is not allowed there, they revised their plan, setting out up the Great Gulf Trail, but still hoping to get to and walk along the Auto Road. Working without a map, they questioned hikers they met and were directed to the Chandler Brook Trail, which climbs ruggedly out of the Gulf to a meeting with the Auto Road near the 4-mile mark.

The pair carried few supplies, but each was toting some past medical problems, and Philip was wearing old boots. On the steep trail, Philip began to sweat profusely and falter; the soles of his boots began to come off. At the same time, they got off-trail, and then Megan's GPS—their only navigation system—died. Megan tried to call 911 but couldn't get service. She decided to leave Philip to find a signal, advising him to "just go downhill" if he felt worse. Megan took with her their thin supplies of water and food. Philip's only equipment was a sweatshirt.

A little after 1 P.M. Megan reached 911, and the call found its way to NHFG Sgt. Lucas, who spoke to Megan a little after 3 P.M. Using the coordinates of her call, Lucas plotted her position and talked Megan back to the Chandler Brook Trail and told her how to reach the Auto Road. She did this and was able to flag a tour van and get a ride down to the Glen House.

Getting enough information to search for Philip took some time. At a little after 9 P.M. NHFG COs Lucas, Holmes, and Frye convened at the Mount Washington Auto Road. Lucas and Holmes prepared to drive up the Auto Road to the juncture with the Chandler Brook Trail, where they would hike down to look for Philip. At the same time, a MWSP employee was hiking up

from the Great Gulf. Frye would interview Megan for more information and stay in touch with the searchers.

At 1:24 A.M. on September 1, CO Holmes called down saying they had found Philip and that he was alive. He was now at the junction of the Great Gulf and Chandler Brook Trails and had responded to the whistle of the MWSP searcher. Frye then brought his ATV up the Great Gulf Trail to Osgood Trail, where he met the rescuers and Philip, who had walked slowly out. Everyone was out by 6 A.M.

Comment: The COs' interviews with Megan and Philip described a curious mix of stubborn determination and disregard. Philip—described by his daughter as “very stubborn”—really wanted to walk on the Auto Road, even after being told it was illegal. Despite being unfit and ill-equipped, he and his daughter devised a plan to reach the road via a very demanding route, where eventually they encountered real trouble.

To get to the scene of their trouble, the pair relied on advice from passing hikers and a GPS, which eventually ran out of battery. Without a map and with few supplies, they were in deeper trouble when they got off-trail a number of miles into the wilderness. Then, even as Philip's boots began to fall apart, they kept on. Even the worst-equipped hikers usually know to turn back when their footwear fails. Once in trouble, the pair shifted to the modern default—let's call for help. Except that they couldn't get reception in the sharp valley of the Great Gulf.

And so they felt forced to split up. A more prudent plan would have been to follow Megan's advice to Philip and go downhill together, at least initially. Philip clearly did so once left on his own, and he eventually found the more traveled Great Gulf Trail, though it seems to have been too late to get help from any passersby. NHFG recommended that they be charged for this rescue.

Colder Shoulder

October 30 wasn't a day to draw one out. At least that must have been on Michael P.'s mind as he sat beside the Isolation Trail in the mid-afternoon, waiting for his three friends to return from Mount Isolation's summit. Nearby Mount Washington averaged 34 degrees that day, and 1.74 inches of rain fell.

Sometime after 4 P.M., when the three friends returned, Michael was gone. As they followed the Isolation Trail down toward its junction with the Rocky Branch Trail, where they would turn east toward their car, the friends kept finding evidence of Michael's preceding them—a plastic bag of soggy

clothing, some candy wrappers. Those indicators then ended, and the friends continued on, making the turn onto the Rocky Branch Trail and arriving at their car in the early evening. Michael wasn't there. The group called for help.

At about 8 P.M., NHFG Sgt. Alex Lopashanski learned from them that Michael, age 31, was a novice hiker and didn't have a phone or light. Though he did have rain gear, Michael had fallen in a stream earlier and was likely still wet. Lopashanski reasoned that Michael had likely missed the turn east and gone straight, or south, on the Rocky Branch Trail. Lopashanski summoned two COs, Joseph Canfield and Benjamin Lewis, and met them at the Jericho Road trailhead. Canfield and Lewis headed up into the night at 10:30 P.M. An hour later they reached Rocky Branch Shelter #1, found no one, and kept on up trail, calling out and flashing lights as they climbed. The cold rain intensified.

By 2:30 A.M. the ruckus of the river made voice-searching difficult, and the COs also could not cross the rising water. They turned back. Lopashanski then needed two more COs, Christopher Brison and Frye, to search the eastern section of the trail, and at 6 A.M. they started up from the trailhead on Route 16. At 8:30 A.M., Brison and Frye were turned back at a river crossing. Meanwhile Lt. Brad Morse had called Lopashanski to say he would relieve him and that he would begin gathering more help for the search.

A 10:22 A.M. phone call ended the search. Michael was at Patch's Market in Glenn, having weathered the night under some rocks near Rocky Branch Shelter #1 before walking out to Jericho Road in the morning.

Comment: What might have been a more relaxed search during the summer gained urgency in the wet cold of late October. That urgency was compounded by the torrential rain of the 30th and 31st, when the nearby observatory recorded more than 5 inches of rain with temperatures hovering in the 30s.

Even though the three friends who left Michael to complete the climb of Mount Isolation had been assured he'd wait for them, leaving a novice hiker alone in the cold rain was a bad plan. Anyone who has waited while wet and cold knows that time slows, that one wants to get moving again, if only to warm up. It's easy to imagine his thinking: *I'll just begin retracing my steps and meet them at the car.* That he left an initial tracery of gear and candy wrappers indicates that he expected to be followed. But the tracery ran out before the turn to the east, and Michael missed that lone turn, went on into the early darkness and then the long, wet night. By the time his friends reached the car and found Michael missing, they'd guaranteed a long, wet night for the COs called out to search.

COVID Knock-on Effects

We've all grown used to the way the old normal dwindles in the rearview mirror, replaced then by a landscape with familiar outlines and unfamiliar practices. That, of course, has been true for mountain rescuers, whose practice has always involved close contact—with those they would help, and with each other. That would be even truer for the specialists from Mountain Rescue Service, who come to retrieve us when we are stuck on a cliff or moored to woe on high-angled ground.

I emailed longtime volunteer and former president of MRS Rick Wilcox to get his take on COVID-19's influence in and on his group. As has been true with many groups, MRS has had to ask a number of questions and make transitions during the two years of the pandemic. Chief among the questions were figuring out which personal protective equipment (PPE) gear was needed “to go safely on a rescue mission” and what to do when you encounter other teams or accident victims who were not following government PPE guidelines. “Do you leave a rescue scene when another team is not following government guidelines?” he asked. Not everyone agreed, and some MRS members decided not to go and risk bringing COVID home to their families and friends.

Then, “While we were having all kinds of discussions about what to do, things opened up and people that had been cooped up headed for the hills. Fish and Game were maxed out. We at MRS were getting a call a week for litter carries. Inexperienced hikers who were out of shape seemed to sprain an ankle and need rescue every week.” While litter-carrying is a necessary part of rescue work, it's not the best use of highly skilled climbers, nor is it what many signed up for. Turnouts for those sorts of missions declined some.

A final challenge arrived when Steve Dupuis decided that, after five years, he needed to step away from being president. MRS then continued the work Rick and Steve had begun—recruiting new team members, thereby making the team younger, rejuvenating it. Michael Wejchert took on the leadership role, and, according to Rick, “He has done a great job bringing the team back together . . . and adding another six young climbers to the team. The team is stronger than ever.”

Wejchert (a climber and writer who serves on the Appalachia Committee) responded to my email with a few thoughts that dovetail nicely with Rick's:

As a team we do our best to adhere to the changing environment and CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and state guidelines. Of course, these are always in flux, but we're decent at thinking on our feet! Put it this way: our phones are on.

I've always considered MRS's job as assisting Fish and Game and the MWAC [Mount Washington Avalanche Center] in whatever capacity we could. Sometimes this means a high-angle rescue or heading into technical terrain above treeline in winter. Other times it means hiking up South Moat in summer to help with a litter carry. We have an array of skills and we are always on call. Nowadays, larger teams like the Lakes SAR and Pemi SAR shoulder much of that load and that's great. I will say, too, that what I consider "my" generation, the folks in the 25- to 40-year-old range, are doing a fantastic job and are taking more responsibility in the organization. Paired with the wealth of knowledge and experience already on MRS, it's a pretty cool thing to see, and we look forward to growing alongside the organizations we work with often.

—*Sandy Stott, Accidents Editor*

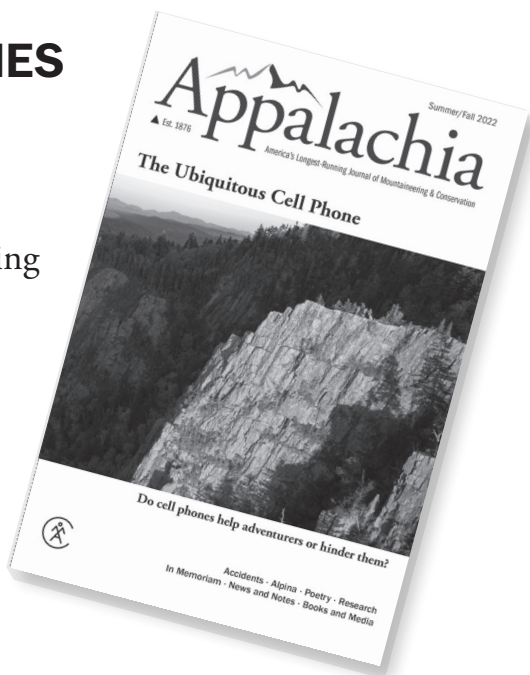
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