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## Accidents

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# Accidents

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

## Hiking with Yourself

Last November, while getting ready for some time on Mount Cardigan's Skyland ridge, I got to thinking about which self I was packing for. Like many of us, I leave a trailhead with varied possibilities and hopes, and those aims are often evident in what I carry. On this day, I was stuffing trail bars, layers, my headlamp (doubled), and so forth into my trail-running vest. I'd taken a few minutes to glass the mountain's ledges with my binoculars, and I'd caught some winking from ice in spots; in went the microspikes. When strapped on, the vest gave me a grizzly-like hump between my shoulder blades, but it rode easily, lightly. Like nothing at all . . . almost . . . I thought to myself as I set out.

That self was complicated, however, by a second self. He had read the trail map, packed as I had, and was already a mile in, nearing the junction of Woodland Trail and Clark Trail that would determine how much ridge I would travel that day. We—he and I—wouldn't have looked much different to a casual observer had we been standing side by side, but I was acutely aware of what separated us. The me out in front—let's call him me-1—was five years younger and moving at pace (it might, with imagination, even be called running); the me setting out from the trailhead—logically, me-2—settled now into a stride that only a boulder would call speedy. Both of us were broadly happy. Mountains will do that. But which of us would determine the hike?

In this introduction to thinking about incidents and accidents, I am not trying to be difficult. I am suggesting focusing again on the seat of many accidents—the mind. My concern here is how clearly we recognize who we are on a given day. In my example, the slightly younger me-1 had put in the same 20 to 30 miles per week of foot-time as me-2, but those miles had been largely run. Me-2 had walked the bulk of his last week's 25. Through whose eyes was I seeing my mountain day?

A cold front bearing possible snow squalls was forecast to move in later in the day. Going left on the Woodland Trail at the Clark junction would stretch

the day by four-plus miles and lengthen its ridgetop time by an hour-plus. There's a lot to like about both prospects. But me-2 couldn't run uphill for long, even if necessary; recent workouts said that the physical chops for that just weren't there. So, with a weather-shift nearing, the only right call for the day was the shorter walk, which also featured a bailout if needed. Not a tough call, it turned out.

But now, I'm lying. It was a tough call, because me-1 was (and is) alive in my mind and even, for short bursts, in my engine and legs. *C'mon*, he might (did) say, *we can still do this*. And that prod, plus the familiar excitement of ridge-racing weather, might have sent me left and long at the fork.

In this instance, I behaved as if I've matured; me-2's mountain day was very fine, and both of me reveled in the mild windburn I brought home.

This multiplicity of selves is no surprise to the fit and active. And I've simplified the dilemma by citing only two selves close in age and capability. But sometimes, when all our selves get together to consider the uphill before them, the crowd noise rises to rumble; memory-selves can drown out the small voice of me-now. How we respond in this moment can often determine what happens with and to us as a mountain day unfolds.

—Sandy Stott  
Accidents Editor

### **Abbreviations in the Accidents Report**

*The full name of these organizations and titles is introduced the first time each appears, but because this department includes many stories in which the abbreviations appear, this list can help keep the acronyms straight.*

Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue: AVSAR

Conservation Officer: CO

Dartmouth-Hitchcock Advanced Response Team: DHART

Mountain Rescue Service: MRS

New Hampshire Army National Guard: NHANG

New Hampshire Fish and Game: NHFG

Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue: PVSAR

## Inside Out

We've paired the two typical rescues that follow as a reminder of the ways in which our mountains can elicit trouble in the inexperienced. And, for those with many years and miles of experience in the White Mountains, as further reminder that either of these two emergencies could be right around the bend in the trail ahead. These rescues serve then as reminders of rescuers' usual work and mild prods for each of us, who, sooner or later, is likely to be one of the four Samaritans who appear in the second story.

A few weeks before my mountain day described earlier, on November 6, Christina P., age 23, and her friend Stephen Z. set out to climb to the Franconia Ridge via the Falling Waters Trail. On nearby and taller Mount Washington, the temperature averaged a little cooler than normal at 21 degrees Fahrenheit, with (for the mountain) light winds around 30 MPH; the sun shone all day.

Around 2:30 P.M. New Hampshire Fish and Game Lt. Jim Kneeland got a call from New Hampshire State Police asking that he contact Stephen. Kneeland's call went through, and he learned that Christina's legs had given out after the pair reached the summit of Little Haystack Mountain. At that point, they'd hydrated and eaten to try to regain energy, but Christina was now shaking and felt unable to move. Kneeland tried to coach them toward a gradual descent of the Falling Waters Trail, but the pair felt that was beyond them; Kneeland then called fellow conservation officers and Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue for assistance.

A little before 3 P.M., Stephen called again to say that they would begin to work their way down. Kneeland began checking in with them every 15 minutes. During one call, he learned that Christina was also feeling chest pains, an ongoing complication they'd not mentioned before. By 4 P.M., the pair had reached Shining Rock, less than half a mile from the summit. The first rescuers arrived at 4:45 P.M., and their assessment was that Christina could keep walking down with assistance. As the group worked its way down, Christina regained some of her strength, and at 6:40 P.M. the whole party reached the trailhead.

**Comment:** This straightforward incident offers a simple reminder of two weathers that each of us needs consider in the mountains. On that November day, the external weather promised an excellent, late fall day. But Christina carried within her a chronic condition that makes the long, heavy work of climbing difficult. The Falling Waters Trail is also one of the more difficult climbs in the Whites. Her exhaustion atop Little Haystack, which she and

Stephen tried to address by rehydrating and refueling, made the return trip look impossible.

At that point her body was also sending other worrisome signals: chest pains, shaking, and deep fatigue. At such a time, worry can overwhelm. What began to shift the balance back to where Christina could function was first the voice and then the arrival of trained rescuers, who could assess her situation and then assist her descent. That Christina gained some momentum as her assisted descent went on is one of search and rescue's common stories.

—*Sandy Stott, Accidents Editor, and  
Scott Berkley, Assistant Accidents Editor*

### **Getting Down**

Around 4:30 P.M. on February 20, NHFG got a call about a hiker having problems on her descent of the Liberty Spring Trail. NHFG CO Jonathan Demler was nearby in Woodstock wrapping up his day, and he responded to the call. On his way there, Demler heard from Lt. Kneeland that the hiker felt dizzy and unable to continue her descent. Demler rode his snowmobile to the trailhead and started hiking up a little before 5:30 P.M.

A half-hour later, Demler came upon a group of six hikers descending; one was the caller, Aleeza S., age 26. Aleeza was accompanied by her boyfriend, Suryanarayan S., and four good Samaritans, who said they had found Aleeza prone on the trail a little earlier. Aleeza and her friend were moving steadily at this point. Demler was soon joined by two more COs and several rescuers from PVSAR.

After ascertaining that Aleeza felt she could continue, Demler told the Samaritans that they could continue their hike and leave the rest to the rescuers. After providing the pair with headlamps, the rescue party descended, reaching the parking area around 7 P.M. There, Demler interviewed Aleeza and Suryanarayan and two other friends who had begun the day with them but split away during the hike.

The group had begun at 10 A.M. with the aim of climbing Mount Liberty but found the going slow. Somewhere short of the summit, the hikers, now split into pairs, turned around. A mile or so from the base, Aleeza felt dizzy and unable to go on, which was when she and Suryanarayan called. Demler learned that Aleeza had no hiking experience and that she had not eaten that day until the Samaritans gave her some electrolytes and encouragement. Nor were she and Suryanarayan carrying extra clothing or the usual

hiking essentials. In his report, Demler found the pair unprepared and recommended that they be billed for the rescue.

**Comment:** The 20th was a usual winter day in the Whites with some sunshine and clouds; up high on Washington's summit, trace amounts of snow fell, and the temperature averaged 1 degree, with the air hurried along by winds in the mid-60s. So, even at 3,000 feet above sea level on the Liberty Spring Trail, it would have felt like . . . winter. To set out to climb above treeline, with little equipment or experience, is a spectacular, albeit common, misreading of both place and self. The hikers' only genuflection to terrain and season lay in the microspikes they used. To make such an attempt without understanding the basic work of fueling, hydrating, and thereby staying warm and functional on the trail redoubles the jeopardy.

Not long ago, in a conversation about rescues in the Whites, a NHFG CO said, "There's no counting the number of unofficial rescues that happen up there. As a group, hikers are helpful, often eager to share what they know, and, if necessary, what they carry. Without this general attitude, we'd have hundreds more rescues to perform."

—SS and SB

### Slippage

On February 21, Laura C., age 52, met four other hikers for a Presidents' Day hike on the Kinsman Range. The five had made contact via Facebook. The day was wintry, with the Mount Washington Observatory recording an average temperature of 1 and winds in the 30-MPH range. In the late morning, as the group reached the 3,300-foot level, more than a mile beyond Carter Notch Hut on the Fishin' Jimmy Trail, they started up a steep, icy section. As she navigated this ground, Laura slipped and fell ten to fifteen feet. The fall wedged her left leg under her awkwardly, and when she stopped she felt immediate, severe pain. Her four companions rallied to her, trying to assess her injury, and secure her against a farther fall. They got a pad under her for insulation and used ropes to keep her in place.

The group also used this time to see if Laura's pain would diminish and they might begin to self-rescue, but her pain kept on. A little before noon, they called for help. NHFG Lt. Kneeland returned their call, and after learning that Laura's pain was still strong and her leg muscles were spasming, he began organizing a rescue, summoning NHFG COs and volunteers from PVSAR. The rescuers got underway between 1 and 1:30 P.M., with first rescuers arriving at 2:40 P.M.

Laura's pain was still significant, and rescuers had to cut several trees to fashion a flat spot where she could be assessed and, finally, placed in a Sked litter (which is made of plastic), whose flexibility allows it to be worked and roped down and around obstacles in steep, narrow trails. The group started down at 4 P.M., using belays to lower the Sked through steep sections, and finally reached the trailhead parking area and ambulance at 6:20 P.M. There, Kneeland learned the story of Laura's fall and noted that she was well-equipped for her hike and had been wearing microspikes when she fell. In a follow-up call two days later, Kneeland learned that Laura had broken her leg during her fall.

**Comment:** Laura's group was well prepared for their day on the Kinsmans, and they responded well to her fall, first coming to her aid and securing her against another fall, then, waiting through the initial surge of injury pain and the group adrenaline that comes with an accident. When it was clear Laura's accident was serious, they called for help.

What draws the eye and mind, when we look at slips and falls, is the footwear. Kneeland points out that Laura was wearing boots with microspikes attached and that her accident happened on a "steep, icy section of the trail." That Laura needed to be secured by her group to avoid farther falling points to a tough stretch; that the rescuers had to cut away some trees to fashion a platform to help Laura underlines that assessment. Which brings us to a consideration of traction on slippery slopes.

Microspikes, like any good invention, arrived to fulfill a need in 2007: hardpacked or icy slopes ask for traction beyond boot soles. Crampons, of course, have offered that traction pretty much since climbing encountered winter. But crampons, with the prominent sharp points and rigidity, often feel like overkill on 15-degree slopes, and putting on and taking off crampons takes time and care, both sometimes in short supply on a frigid day. Enter the microspike—stubby traction provided by the spikes and chains that are attached to a rubberized footprint that pulls on fairly easily. Prepared hikers and climbers could still carry crampons, but now those could be reserved for the steep stuff. All good.

Enter the Whites (and many other ranges): Marquee locations such as Tuckerman Ravine make your choosing of traction relatively easy. On lower-angled approaches, use microspikes; on higher-angled terrain such as headwalls, use crampons. All good. But the Whites have wrinkles to toss at us in shape of sudden, sharp ups or downs on generally moderate climbs. The Kinsmans and many other peaks offer just that. Kneeland's description and



*Microspikes, right, are short spikes attached to a flexible material that wraps around the boot. Crampons provide traction on steeper, icy slopes. They are sharper, bigger, and longer and attach to boots by various systems.* SANDY STOTT

my experiences on the Fishin' Jimmy Trail point to just such a sharp “up” where Laura fell. Whether she had crampons and didn't switch to them isn't apparent in the official report, but the useful point remains either way: Pitches where the slope rises over 25 degrees are risky in microspikes.

As we climb, we lean into the slope and our weight concentrates toward the front of the foot; also, our foot's force begins to stretch the rubberized harness that keeps the spikes attached to our boots. Fewer spikes bite into the slippery surface; those that do are stubby and don't penetrate; slipping, especially on hard ice, becomes easy. Once we fall, the collision is what stops us.

All in all, microspikes and other such traction devices have made winter hiking safer and more convenient. Portable and relatively easy to put on, they help us avoid slippage on moderate slopes. But, when the slope's angle rises and the ice grows hard, we still need crampons and training in their use for better safety, even if the stretch of trail ahead is only 50 yards long.

—SS



## Too Early in the Sun

A sporadic winter of snow and thaw left many Northeastern skiers hoping that April would bring late-season snow showers in the high elevations. Others, with eyes trained on the steep descents in the Presidential Range, hoped for the warm direct-sun days and below-freezing nights that make skiing steep lines possible. Morning sun thawing a frozen slope creates a top layer of so-called corn snow that a ski edge can dig into and find purchase, even on improbably steep angles. But those hoping for a longer winter got their wish before the spring sun came. Continual snow showers and mixed precipitation in early April meant that the traditional opening month of spring skiing in the Presidentials was a fickle meeting of seasons.

April 15 brought warming temperatures after a stretch of snow followed by rain. Temperatures dipped to 20 degrees Fahrenheit overnight, with the Mount Washington Avalanche Center advisory forecasting stable snow and calling for partial sun and highs in the 40s. Patrick M., age 31, set off from the base of the Cog Railway at 8 A.M., intending to descend some of the steep lines that descend off the northeast aspect of Mount Clay in the Great Gulf Wilderness. Patrick had visited Tuckerman Ravine on previous outings but was going to the Great Gulf for the first time. Patrick, a lifelong skier, was in his fourth season using a splitboard, a modular snowboard that splits into two for ascending like a pair of touring skis, then buckles together as a solid unit to descend.

Patrick began the long climb alongside the Cog Railway, often used by skiers as a route for ascent or descent to or from the higher reaches of Mount Washington, shortly after 8 A.M. Descending steep snow in the spring-time involves an early start to evade the issue of wet snow avalanches later in the day. During clear days in the spring, midday sun and solar gain can cause large sections of snowfields to warm quickly and avalanche in loose, wet formations during the afternoon. High-elevation skiers can arrive at their intended descent neither too early, risking a long sliding fall on hard snow, nor too late, risking wet snow that can easily slide.

Patrick likely reached the ridge between Washington and Clay, after climbing the Cog, sometime in the midmorning, between 10 and 11 A.M. The steep couloirs that drop from the crags ringing the Great Gulf on the northeast aspect below the summit of Clay form a spate of popular steep ski descents. Each couloir, or chute, involves mandatory sections of descending on 40-degree and steeper snow, which demands strength and technique as well as precise awareness of conditions. Unlike on lower-angle snow, where a

skier can quickly react to a change in conditions without falling, steep snow provides little time to react. Even a small patch of hard snow where skis—or a splitboard—fail to find purchase can spell disaster.

While on the ridge above the Great Gulf, Patrick talked to another skier who was selecting a descent, John D., who had also ascended the Cog to access the Great Gulf descents and was waiting on the ridge for the sun to warm and soften the snow enough to ski. Following his conversation with John, Patrick chose to descend Turkey Chute, which drops north off the ridge into the cleft between Washington and Clay, intersecting after about 700 vertical feet at the base of an often-skied, larger couloir called Airplane Gully. Turkey Chute has a sheer top section and a relatively narrow “choke” point in lower-snow conditions.

John, who had skied down Airplane Gully and was stopped on a snowfield below, witnessed Patrick begin descending Turkey Chute, then lose control and start to fall down the couloir, tumbling all the way to the base. John sprang into action, skiing over to where Patrick was lying unconscious, then activating the SOS function on a GPS device he was carrying. John, who had basic wilderness first-aid training, also worked to get Patrick, who was bleeding from his head and had broken his helmet, situated on a small snow platform with clothing and an emergency blanket to insulate him. Patrick regained disoriented semi-consciousness as John worked, asking where they were and what had happened to him.

Two skiers appeared on the ridge above Turkey Chute and, seeing John waving in distress, quickly descended to meet them. The first skier to arrive was Ryan Driscoll, a guide and member of the Mountain Rescue Service, which specializes in technical rescues. He was guiding a skier in the Presidentials that day. Driscoll, well trained in dealing with trauma victims, assessed Patrick’s condition and became increasingly concerned seeing that Patrick’s breathing was labored: “I figured something was really wrong,” he later commented.

Driscoll realized that a prolonged carryout through the base of the Great Gulf, involving multiple rescue teams over a dozen or more hours, would not get Patrick to medical care quickly enough.

Fortunately, John’s SOS, sent just after 11 A.M., had set into action a quicker rescue protocol. NHFG Lt. Mark Ober, alerted to the SOS signal by a dispatcher, contacted John via his GPS; after John described the extent of Patrick’s injuries, texting Ober via his own GPS device, Ober contacted the New Hampshire Army National Guard in Concord to request helicopter

assistance to extract Patrick. The Black Hawk helicopter, activated with crew just after 12 P.M., flew into the Great Gulf at 1:15 P.M., lowering a National Guard medic to assess Patrick's condition. Driscoll, John, and the medic loaded Patrick into a litter and hoisted him to the helicopter, which departed for Dartmouth-Hitchcock Hospital in Lebanon just before 2 P.M. Patrick remained hospitalized for about two weeks recovering from his head trauma, four chipped vertebrae, and a collapsed lung.

**Comment:** Skiers exploring the Presidentials for steep descents have traditionally focused on the major east-facing ravines: Tuckerman, famous for its springtime throngs of skiers, and Huntington, sought more by climbers but with skiable snow. With more visitation following the pandemic-induced backcountry ski boom, however, those well-known ravines just an hour's approach hike from Pinkham Notch have started to seem less attractive and increasingly crowded and mundane. More and more skiers with mountaineering skills and the willingness to go farther have been setting their sights on ski descents in Oakes Gulf, Ammonoosuc Ravine, King Ravine, and, like Patrick, the Great Gulf. Such descents have also been better publicized following the release of Kurt Niiler's *Presidential Skiing* (Locke Mountain Press) in 2020. Skiers must make longer approaches into these "other" ravines. Often they ascend the Presidential ridge via the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail or, as Patrick did, along the Cog Railway, before traversing to the top of the ravine and descending the desired route.

Experienced skiers traveling to the less accessible ravines know to vet their objectives carefully. Unlike in Tuckerman Ravine, where Mount Washington Avalanche Center snow rangers and the Mount Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol provide conditions and safety advice—and, at times, rescue assistance—to skiers, descending into the Great Gulf requires more self-sufficiency in the event that something goes wrong. It also means taking a guess at conditions before seeing the ski descent firsthand, because—unlike in Tuckerman, where skiers typically ascend the bowl before skiing down and therefore get a close look at conditions before they ski—skiers on these more remote routes enter from the top. Skiers can thus only guess or make an educated assessment of conditions on what they are about to descend, not having the benefit of kicking a boot or swinging an axe into the snow surface in the middle of the chute or couloir to check conditions. And, unlike in east-facing Tuckerman, where the morning sun hits the snow early and warms the surface to a skiable condition, descents in the north- and west-facing ravines tend not to soften until much later in the day; sometimes north-facing lines do not come into

condition at all, even on a day when the Tuckerman descents are in prime shape.

Such were the perils that Patrick had to manage. He had ascended on the Cog Railway route and intended to drop down Turkey Chute into the Great Gulf on that April morning. Whether he chose the challenges or simply hoped for skiable snow, we don't know. With an early start from the base of the Cog, Patrick arrived at the top of the route he intended to descend before the north-facing Turkey Chute had received enough sun needed to soften the snow and make it a more manageable descent. "Avalanche danger is heavy on timing," as Driscoll put it. Patrick had the right inclination to ask another skier who was in the area at the time—John—about which run would be safest or most manageable at that hour. But without the firsthand information gleaned by climbing up the route he was about to descend on his splitboard, there was little Patrick could do to assess conditions.

Conditions in a north-facing Presidential couloir on an April morning can often be presumed deadly until proven safe. Skiers (and climbers) sometimes have to wait for hours until the sun has softened the snow before making an attempt on the line. The best way to go up or down on hard snow, or snow that is suspect, is with ice axe and crampons. Hence, some skiers will choose to attempt only ski descents that they have just ascended, so that they know the conditions exactly. As the popularity of the many brilliant farther-afield Presidential ski descents grows, so too will the need for sound assessment of when it is safe to descend these routes in fickle spring conditions.

Finally, John's GPS was immensely effective in communicating with NHFG. Without the GPS device—a Garmin inReach—that John used to alert rescuers to Patrick's situation, and then to communicate with Ober as the helicopter was dispatched, it would have been almost impossible to set a rescue in motion with such precision and detail. The rescue overall would have proceeded at a much slower pace had the SOS alert not gone out; given the nature of Patrick's injuries, those additional elapsed hours could have meant a different outcome to the rescue. In a stroke of good fortune for all involved, John had purchased and set up the inReach just before this eventful day on Washington, motivated by what he had heard in an avalanche safety course about the importance of setting a rescue in motion as early as possible if a victim is severely injured. And—a fitting final coincidence—John's instructor in that informative avalanche course was none other than Driscoll.

—SB

## Sliding Falls—Long and Otherwise

The Mount Washington Avalanche Center website ([mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org/](http://mountwashingtonavalanchecenter.org/), a must-read for anyone heading out and up in the winter and its shoulder seasons), is unequivocal about the danger of long sliding falls: “Long sliding falls kill more people in the Presidential Range than hypothermia or avalanches” (from a post on March 15, 2022).

Such falls are the maxi version of winter’s primary accident generator, slipping. To be true to the “long” part of “long, sliding falls,” they must take place in open spaces on angled ground. The usual suspects in the Whites are the ravines—Tuckerman, Huntington, King—and their Gulfy neighbors—Gulf of Slides, Great Gulf, Oakes Gulf.

Tuckerman Ravine, with its sunny-day multitudes, can offer a sometimes-cartoonish series of such falls. Here’s an MWAC description of one such fall on the route known as the Chute in the winter of 2022:

On Saturday March 26, 2022, a 25-year-old male took a 500-foot fall while attempting to ski the skier’s left side of Chute. The skier reported that the cause of the fall was due to one of his ski bindings releasing in the upper part of the run. The videos of the event showed that the skier became airborne for over 50 vertical feet after he hit the rocks to the side of Chute and then continued to tomahawk down the slope to the ravine floor.

It takes zero imagination to figure the mayhem such a fall can unleash in one’s body. One of MWAC’s takeaways from this fall follows:

Even if this skier had an ice axe in hand, it’s unlikely that any attempt to self-arrest would have changed the outcome. The practiced ability to self-arrest is important for mountain travel; however, effective use of this skill is limited to softer surfaces at lower angles. Often the best way to protect yourself is to simply not fall. In practice this means recognizing the icy, hard, snow conditions, and dialing back terrain choices to match abilities and for a wider margin of error.

Just so in evidently high-risk terrain. My wider purpose in this excerpt is to make us all think a little more about medium and short sliding falls. Most of us won’t risk a 500-foot fall in one of the glacial gouges on Washington, but we will cross the top of a ledge that drops 50 or 100 feet. Perhaps that ledge is also a summer familiar that we sidle across on a vein of quartz running

diagonally up. (I have in mind here a 50-foot, 30-degree ledge on the north flank of Gilman Mountain.) Winter passage is an entirely different proposition—the quartz vein is often an icy bulge; the spruce at the top hard to get into; the possible fall, long enough. It is, on the loop I often take, the only gotta-have-crampons stretch. On this short section . . . I gotta have crampons. —SS

### **Body Signals**

During the afternoon of March 18, 2022, a guest at Carter Notch Hut began to feel worrisome symptoms. Stephane S., age 49, had climbed Nineteen-Mile Brook Trail earlier that day with a friend, and, during a stroll near the hut, he had complained of chest pains, nausea, and tingling in his hands. He also felt cold, and so they went inside and sat by the fire, hoping the feelings would dissipate.

They did not, and Stephane's friend Clark C. made a series of calls that set in motion a rescue. Clark, a Vermonter, first called his daughter, a surgeon at the University of Vermont Medical Center, and explained the symptoms to her; she, in turn, brought a cardiologist into the conversation, who, after listening, said it could be a heart attack and recommended getting Stephane out and to a hospital immediately. Clark then set off his Garmin alarm.

A little after 7:30 P.M. NHFG Lt. Ober got a call from Sgt. Alex Lopashanski, who had been in touch with Carter Notch Hut caretaker Emily Sherman, who was monitoring Stephane. Lopashanski and Ober began the flurry of calls usual for an urgent rescue.

Among those calls were two asking about the possibility of helicopter rescue. NHANG didn't have a crew available, but the Dartmouth Hitchcock Advanced Response Team (DHART) helicopter, on site 24 hours a day, offered to try and soon arrived overhead at Carter Notch. But DHART's helicopter needs to land because it is too small to have the winching that can haul someone aboard via a dropped line, and those on the ground and the pilot couldn't find a place to land. The DHART helicopter returned to its base.

Ober kept making calls and arrived at the Nineteen-Mile Brook Trail trailhead at 9 P.M., where he met with the four initial responders from Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue (AVSAR); they then took to the trail. During the next two hours more rescuers kept arriving, and first Ober briefed them and then they began the climb to Carter; the number of rescuers soon swelled to 29.

AVSAR's Mike Pelchat reached the hut at 10:53 P.M. By 11:30 he had done a medical assessment and found Stephane's vital signs stable, even as he still felt some chest pressure. Stephane was willing to begin a walk out. At 11:42 the AVSAR crew and NHFG CO Levi Frye began walking Stephane out. A half-hour later the group had walked down the first mile. At 1:30 A.M. the growing rescue group (rescuers had continued to ascend to meet those descending) reached the aqueduct and dam that crosses over Nineteen-Mile Brook. There, a group from MRS had fixed safety lines for the crossing.

Here, Stephane "ran out of steam," and once over the crossing, the rescuers switched to carrying him in a litter, arriving at Route 16 at 2 A.M., where they were met by an ambulance.

**Comment:** Even a quick read of this incident's details points out how "in touch" parts of the backcountry are with the front—when there's a signal. A constant feed of information into and out from the hut gave rescuers a clear sense of the moment's urgency and how events were unfolding. The speed of response is also eye-catching: A little more than three and a half hours went by from NHFG's being called to AVSAR's four-person team's arrival, with Emergency Medical Technician Pelchat then able to give trained assessment. Nineteen-Mile Brook Trail is, by the way, 3.8 miles long, and it rises nearly 2,000 feet to reach Carter Notch.

As often happens with medical emergencies that end well, this one offered a bit of mystery. Doctors at Androscoggin Valley Hospital determined Stephane hadn't had a heart attack. Some other set of factors had conspired to make him feel unwell, and his condition, when explained to others, suggested cardiac trouble. In each of this column's stories, we hope readers will imagine themselves in the various roles the people play. In this one, I would hope that whether I were Stephane, Clark, Carter's caretaker Emily, Ober, AVSAR's first responders, or the 24 other rescuers at various points along the way, I would respond as this story's people did.

—SS

### Looking Out

On April 3, Matthew K., age 25, and Ryan C. set out to climb Mount Kearsarge North. At the top the pair paused to take in the renowned views. Matt wanted photos from the added elevation of the fire tower, and so he climbed to the top. While setting himself to take a photo, Matt backed up and missed a step, which sent him falling to the base of the tower. His companion, Ryan, was

there immediately; a nurse, Ryan looked at Matt's significant wounds and had a bystander call for help at 1 P.M.

NHFG Lt. Brad Morse called Ryan, who told him she had witnessed the fall. Matt had hit his head several times. She said that he had several gashes on his head and was vomiting; blood was also flowing from his ears. Morse told Ryan that rescuers from Fryeburg Fire Rescue, Saco Valley Fire Association, and North Conway Fire Department were on their way, and that he would summon more help. Morse then called NHFG's Colonel Kevin Jordan and got the OK to request a helicopter rescue from NHANG.

A little before 2 P.M. NHANG's Dan Jacques called Morse to let him know that they should be at the scene by 3:30 P.M. At the same time, Morse was mobilizing a ground rescue in case the helicopter was unable to retrieve Matt. Morse's next call to Ryan found that Matt was still bleeding from his ears and unable to stand; she had been able to stop the bleeding from his head wounds. Morse told her the helicopter would be there in roughly 1.5 hours.

The helicopter and a team of NHFG COs reached the summit at nearly the same time, and they coordinated to make the airlift. Matt was in the helicopter and on the way to Memorial Hospital in North Conway at 3:45 P.M. The ground rescuers and Ryan reached the trailhead at 5:45 P.M.

**Comment:** The efficiency of response, on the ground and in the air, is no surprise to regular readers of White Mountain search-and-rescue stories. Lt. Morse, a veteran incident commander, managed to get both ground and air rescue to the scene in less than three hours. Kearsarge North is a 3.2-mile climb that rises 2,660 feet; that speed is an accomplishment. And yes, the weather, which can always complicate, allowed for the air rescue.

Morse's report also contains a witness statement from Brad W., who was at the summit when Matt fell. "I was finishing up lunch," Brad wrote, "when I saw Matt snapping pictures. He took a step back to adjust camera and missed his step and fell down the stairs. His girlfriend, who is a nurse, tended to him, and I called 911."

A moment of self- and broad-reflection: Photographing what we see, and what we want others to see, is so common now as to seem reflexive. There! There is beauty, or mystery, or thrill. See, there it was; here it is. O, and I was there.

But the act of photographing something or someone is also an act of transference: Your focus transfers to the place or person being shot, and you, in an odd way, become a sort of floating eye, watching, shooting. Except that your body is still there, wherever it was when you focused on what's to be photographed. It's easy then to take "a step back," to miss your step.



So often in these summaries, an accident happens when we transfer our attention from where we are to what we see or where we hope to be “out there.” Vistas and waterfalls draw us to them with exclamation points; then, where our feet are and what’s beneath them are easy to lose sight of. Perhaps then this new hiking mantra: When in the presence of beauty, watch your feet.

—SS

### **Taking the Lead**

As readers of this column and rescue articles elsewhere know, NHFG’s Law Enforcement Division is responsible for search and rescue statewide. Wherever in New Hampshire’s 9,000-plus square miles someone goes missing, a NHFG conservation officer will arrive and take legal leadership of the SAR effort, signing in and coordinating volunteers, seeing the whole episode through, and finally filing an official report of the incident and its outcomes.

Once upon a while ago, this work constituted a significant but still small percentage of a CO’s work; now that work, especially for those in the prime mountain districts, threatens to become majority work. At the same time two things remain unchanged: The workforce of COs ranges from 40 to 45, and the funding provided by New Hampshire’s legislature doesn’t come close to meeting the annual costs of their SAR work.

I asked the Law Enforcement Division’s Colonel Jordan for some recent stats on NHFG’s SAR work, and he, a leader with decades of SAR-work in his résumé, offered me some of the records he keeps. Here are some key excerpts from that compilation:

- During the 10-year period from 2009 to 2019, NHFG averaged 189 SAR missions per year, which added up to an annual average cost of \$308,952. The highest cost year occurred during the 2018–2019 fiscal year; it totaled \$387,841.
- Support for NHFG’s SAR budget comes from a dollar for each boat, all-terrain vehicle, or snow machine that gets registered in New Hampshire, yielding an average of \$180,000; occasional small infusions from the General Fund have shrunk the funding gap but never eliminated it.
- Since 1989, NHFG has sponsored thirteen legislative bills for the \$200,000 needed to fully fund its SAR operations. None has succeeded.

- To close the annual budget gap, in 2016 NHFG began issuing hikeSafe cards, bought voluntarily by the public for \$25 (individual) or \$35 (family), which had the added benefit of making it unlikely that you would be billed if you called for a rescue. *Unlikely* is a key word here, in that people who call for rescue resulting from negligent behavior (getting benighted without a light, for example) can and are likely to be billed whether carrying the hikeSafe card or not.
- Of the SAR missions NHFG conducts, an annual average of 62 percent are for hikers and climbers. That far outstrips the category in second place, runaways or walkaways, at 14 percent.

So, in essence, a public safety service of a tourist-dependent state relies on voluntary funding from that public.

**A few recommendations from this seat:** New Hampshire's legislature should fund fully this efficient, cost-effective work that serves the whole state, a state that spends millions of dollars persuading tourists that New Hampshire is the place to be and recreate, and a place that responds quickly when they, or you, need help.

The joint NHFG hikeSafe card program and its voluntary rescue card purchases should continue, but instead of these support funds going to the basic operations budget, they should instead go to update SAR equipment, both for NHFG and for the many volunteer groups that make New Hampshire SAR work, and work well. Even tax-phobic New Hampshire should be able to conjure the will to fully fund a SAR composite that works so well.

I wrote fully about SAR financing in my 2018 book *Critical Hours—Search and Rescue in the White Mountains* (University Press of New England). Those wishing a full treatment of this issue can find it in the chapter, “Who Pays (and What That Says).” Little has changed in the few years since I wrote that.

—SS

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