2022

Accidents: Analysis from the White Mountains of New Hampshire and Occasionally Elsewhere

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Accidents

Analysis from the White Mountains of New Hampshire and occasionally elsewhere

Tipping Point

An article in the Boston Globe last October chronicled a June 2022 incident in which no one was injured . . . and everyone ended up outraged. The headline teased, “After Horror Show Hiker Rescues, N. H. Asks Whether Criminal Charges Are the Next Frontier.” Well, of course, we read on. And soon, we were back in early summer, June 11, a day of balm and sun, reported the ever-vigilant Mount Washington Observatory. What could go wrong on such a day?

A full answer to that question lies in this column’s first incident, but what caught my (Sandy Stott’s) eye was the official response offered by New Hampshire Fish and Game, the state agency in charge of backcountry rescues. Usually measured, sympathetic, and stoic, NHFG’s search-and-rescue leadership held back little in their assessment of Jason F.’s and Dylan S.’s actions that day. “They had nothing,” NHFG Lt. Jim Kneeland, in whose district the rescue took place, said of the pair’s preparations and equipment. That comment brought me up short. I’ve met and talked with Kneeland, a genial man with more than twenty years of SAR experience and a sterling reputation among the variegated SAR community. I had to force my imagination to see and hear him use those words. “Nothing” reverberated in my mind.

The equally measured Col. Kevin Jordan, head of NHFG’s enforcement wing, and so, also of statewide SAR, had his own strong statement, and he made the decision to charge the pair with reckless conduct. Such a charge is highly unusual in regional and national SAR circles. I also know Jordan, a veteran of decades at NHFG, including a long stint as part of its SAR work. Soft-spoken and clear-minded, Jordan is someone I’d want in charge of my rescue, if I needed one. “Whoa,” I thought, “we’re in new territory,” and I went to do my research into this incident. Read on.

—Sandy Stott, Accidents Editor
—Scott Berkley, Assistant Accidents Editor
On June 11, 2022, two friends, 22-year-old Jason F. and 25-year-old Dylan S., decided to go for a walk in Franconia Notch. They started out up Greenleaf Trail under the sun and balmy palm of a 75-degree day, and beneath the cliffs that lead to a feature called the Eaglet. That area, popular with rock climbers, is threaded with informal trails. At some point, the pair diverged from the Greenleaf Trail and headed up to climb some ledges. They got separated, and at 2:15 p.m. Jason’s emergency call for help found its way to NHFG’s Lt. Kneeland. The caller’s coordinates placed him somewhere on the cliffs on the north end of the Notch, behind the pull-off for viewing the once-upon-an—Old Man of the Mountain profile. Kneeland plotted the position and called Jason.

Jason didn’t know where he was, nor what trail he and Dylan had taken at the outset, nor did he know where Dylan was, other than “up above.” But he did know that he was stuck on a ledge and he felt in danger of falling off. Jason begged for help. Kneeland said he would send help, and then began the calls to summon that help.
Kneeland called Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue’s Allan Clark, asking for help from his technical climbers, and he also called in NHFG Conservation Officer Jonathan Demler. The rescuers met soon thereafter at Exit 34B off I-93. The coordinates from Jason’s initial call placed him at 2,650 feet, just below the steepest section of a formation known as Hounds Hump. This suggested a climb up to him from below, and rescue climbers Rusty T. and Danny B. started toward Jason at 3:25 p.m.; the next team, Chris C. and Laura D., followed 15 minutes later.

It took the climbers little time to reach the area, and once there, they saw and heard no one until, eventually, they heard answering calls from far above. The climbers could find no safe route toward the calls and reported back to Kneeland. Kneeland, meanwhile, had received a call from Dylan, who offered to meet rescuers and help them find Jason. That offer was compromised by Dylan’s not knowing where he was or how to find a way down. Kneeland plugged in the coordinates from Dylan’s call and saw that he was at about 3,100 feet near the top of Hounds Hump. He told Dylan to stay put; the rescuers would come to get him.

The coordinates for Jason’s position on the face kept shifting as Kneeland stayed in touch, and, even as Kneeland could hear Jason’s call’s down in the Notch, the rescuers close to the cliff could not. A little before 5 p.m., Chris and Laura reached Dylan; they were soon joined by Rusty and Danny, and then Dylan tried to lead the rescuers toward Jason. While this went on,

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**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: ARNG
- New Hampshire Fish and Game: NHFG
- Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue: PVSAR
Kneeland got more than a dozen desperate, at times tearful calls from Jason, who was sure he was going to fall.

Kneeland had also called in a drone operator from New England K-9 Search and Rescue. From a new position on Route 93, the valley command post could watch the drone, and Jason reported seeing it once before it needed to return for more batteries. Finally, Jason reported seeing a large bird, and Kneeland was able to spot a turkey vulture soaring near the cliff. This sighting in common finally resolved into Jason’s seeing the flashing blue lights of a cruiser at the command post and, at 6:30 P.M., NE K-9’s Josh S. spotted Jason through binoculars. All of this enabled Kneeland to guide Rusty T. and Laura D. to a spot some 50 feet above Jason. The climbers set an anchor, and Rusty dropped down to Jason and managed to get him into a harness and then roped. A little after 7:30 P.M., Rusty guided Jason up those 50 feet, where Rusty and Laura told Kneeland that they now could walk Jason out via the climbers’ trail to the Eaglet.

**Aftermath:** While this unfolded, Dylan was being led down, arriving at Exit 34B around 8:15 P.M. Kneeland had CO Demler interview Dylan and soon learned that Dylan had asked for an attorney. Kneeland then spoke with Dylan, telling him that he and Jason had put rescuers at risk and they would be charged for doing so. He then asked Dylan to leave the command area and return to their car. When Dylan balked, saying he wanted to wait for his friend because he was worried about him, Kneeland asked where that concern had been when Dylan left Jason behind on the cliff.

Just after 9:30 P.M., the rescuers brought Jason to the trailhead, having had to belay him down some steep stretches. Jason had only the T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers he was wearing. He limped some from reported arthritis that he said was scheduled for surgery the next week.

After interviewing Jason, CO Demler issued summonses to both men, citing New Hampshire statute 631:3 for reckless conduct. The pair appeared in Littleton District Court on August 9. Jason and Dylan both entered guilty pleas in exchange for each receiving a violation-level reckless conduct conviction and $200 fine, plus $48 penalty assessment.

**Comment:** The utter disregard the two men showed during this incident is clear from the brief narrative of their rescue. The pair no more belonged on the ledges of Hounds Hump than a novice paddler would in Class V rapids. One geo-reminder of the risk rescuers take on: Early September saw a large rock slide run across the ledge where rescuers spent time as they tried to locate and rescue Jason. As PVSAR put it on its Facebook page, “Sends shivers doesn’t it?”
But the reverberation from this incident spread beyond the courtroom where Jason and Dylan were arraigned. SAR groups around the country paid heed, which raised the enduring questions about holding those who stray willfully and without preparation accountable for their decisions. New Hampshire is one of a handful of states that allows NHFG, the state agency responsible for backcountry SAR, to charge for negligent behavior that results in the need for search and rescue. Here, the state was stepping farther along the national spectrum toward more accountability by bringing criminal charges.

Other states and organizations promoting outdoor adventure are less assertive, often citing their worry that such monetary or legal penalties will make some adventurers hesitant to call for help when they need it. Seen through the lens of this case and others where willful disregard is evident, we think New Hampshire is on the right track. The publicity from this case and others like it can act as a deterrent, cautioning those unprepared hikers, climbers, and wanderers who might simply go out and up thinking there’s a ready cohort of rescuers at their service. So why get all excited about learning and packing for an adventure? they might think. If I need help, I’ll do what everyone does, call for it. “The absolute goal of charging these guys—one of the primary goals—was to let people know that if you are this careless, if you show this blatant disregard for human safety, there’s a consequence for that and it’s a significant one,” NHFG’s Col. Jordan told the Boston Globe. “This one was egregious,” he wrote to me in a January email.

For those who do prepare, the same competent mosaic of professional and volunteer SAR people will still be on offer without charge or charges.

A further thought occurs. If New Hampshire’s stance on charging for negligent behavior does slow someone in trouble from calling for help, that seems to us a necessary corrective to the burgeoning transfer from self-reliance in the backcountry to screen and phone reliance. Or, put simply, from life in the real world to that on a screen.

—SS

Cold in Any Season

During the afternoon of June 17, Xi C., age 53, climbed away from the Appalachian trailhead parking lot on Route 2 in Randolph to attempt a Presidential Range traverse. He carried with him overnight gear and a report that the weather would get gnarly. A goal-driven hiker, Xi was aiming to add more 4,000-footers to his list of twenty already climbed.
Xi spent the first night at the tent platforms on the Valley Way. The next morning he set out into a day forecast to be windy and cold, with rain moving in; up high, that rain might mix with ice pellets and glaze the rocks. That forecast came true, with the day averaging 35 degrees and bottoming out at 28 atop Mount Washington; nearly an inch of rain fell, as did 1.3 inches of snow and ice. The northwest winds averaged 58 mph, with a top gust of 86.

Xi’s aim on the 18th was Lakes of the Clouds Hut, and his basic route was along the Gulfside Trail. Whether he opted to climb over the summits of Mount Adams and Mount Jefferson is unknown. What is known is that his daylong exposure to the cold, wet wind began to make him hypothermic, and at 5:27 p.m., he texted his wife, Liu, saying, “In Trouble. Can’t move.” She texted back, “Need Help?,” and Xi answered, “Yes. Could die.”

Liu then called 911 and was advised to have her husband call them directly with a description of his predicament and the likelihood that this would give them accurate coordinates. Liu texted this to her husband, and called him as well. Having not heard back from him in roughly an hour, Liu called 911 again, and at 6:34 p.m., the dispatchers contacted NHFG’s Lt. Mark Ober. Ober plugged in coordinates provided by Liu, and they placed Xi about 1.4 miles north of Mount Washington, near the Gulfside and Jewell Trails junction.

Ober then called Liu, who had received another text from Xi at 6:35 p.m., saying “I am lost. Need help.” Ober, engaged at that point in a rescue in Shelburne that was going well, shifted to organizing rescue for Xi, uncertain as he did so, if rescuers would be able to navigate the oncoming night, freezing temperatures, and high winds. Given conditions, Ober went straight to calling specialists: Mountain Rescue Service and members of NHFG’s Advanced SAR team.

Ober drove to the Mount Washington Auto Road and started up to assess conditions up high and to see if rescuers would be able to drive up to a point closest to Xi’s coordinates. At mile 7, Ober reached slush and ice and winds that were moving his cruiser around; he needed to back down carefully to a turnaround point to avoid getting into trouble himself.

As Ober drove down, MRS’s Jeff Fongemie called and offered to call Mount Washington State Park and ask for its assistance. Fongemie arranged to have a state park truck equipped with chains drive to the base of the Auto Road and ferry rescuers back up to just below the summit, a drop-off point closest to Xi’s coordinates. Rescuers rushed to assemble, and a little after 9 p.m., the state park truck started up with six MRS rescuers; at 9:30 p.m., they radioed Ober that they were beginning their descent to Xi’s coordinates. By 10:30 p.m., the truck had returned to pick up and drop off nine more
rescuers, and the six NHFG COs and three MRS members followed the initial group down into the night. At 10:38 p.m. the first group radioed Ober saying they had found Xi, and that MRS emergency medical technician Tim Doyle was assessing Xi and looking for signs of life.

Everyone agreed that Xi’s best chance lay in being carried back up to a waiting truck and then brought down the mountain and on to a nearby hospital. Just after 11, the MRS team had Xi in a hypothermic wrap and packed into a litter; they started back up. At 11:10, rescue group #2 reached group #1, and the joined groups kept carrying up toward the truck.

Ober, meanwhile, repositioned his cruiser at the 5-mile mark, where he could meet the descending state park truck and transfer Xi to it for a quicker trip to the base than would be possible with chains on. Ober also arranged to have Gorham emergency medical services meet them at the base. At 12:45 a.m., the rescuers reached the state park truck; at 1 a.m., the state park truck reached Ober’s cruiser, and rescuers transferred Xi and themselves to the cruiser. Ober reached the base and the Gorham EMS team at 1:20 a.m. At Androscoggin Valley Hospital, a medical team worked to save Xi, but, finally, they could not.

Comment: As is often true with high-stakes rescues, we must imagine the weather. Match the weather described with your experience above treeline. Particularly, review the weights of wind as it grows stronger: What happens at 30 mph? 40? 50? Then 60? Maybe 70? How you answer these questions should help you toward an understanding of where your experience ends and the unknown begins. A reasonable aim for most of us is to never be in conditions beyond our experience. When I was writing *Critical Hours—Search and Rescue in the White Mountains* (University Press of New England, 2018), I quoted longtime SAR volunteer and mountaineer Mike Pelchat, who had this to say about wind:

One thing people often don’t understand is that every 10 mph gain in wind speed increases the force much more than 10 percent. When winds are 80 or 90 mph, you can’t walk or stay on your feet; you’re on your hands and knees waiting for a lull. You can’t lift your goggles up; the wind blows your arms behind you.

Wind such as what Xi experienced carries with it a second threat: It drives moisture through your clothing, which wets you, which makes hypothermia more likely. Rescuers found Xi dressed in good hiking gear, including a down
puffy jacket, and rain gear. He was lying on his back with his gloves off, and other contents of his pack were scattered around him, including a tattered tent. Rescuers speculated that he had been trying to set up some shelter.

We return to the wind and the cold it was driving. Xi was found at about 5,400 feet of elevation on a stretch of the Gulfside Trail that was exposed to that day’s northwest wind. He had reached this point after a full day above treeline, with long stretches of similar exposure. Where the wind places its hand when it buffets us is often a significant factor in the day’s outcome. Xi walked up and along the ridge with the wind at his back or quartering in from his right rear side. Turning back would have meant fronting that wind, an unattractive option for an exhausted hiker.

Hypothermia works by quiet withdrawal; it keeps depleting the little energy bank inside each of us, until there’s little left. As our temperature declines, our body works to keep its core warm, withdrawing blood from our limbs. We grow clumsy, physically and often mentally. Routine actions—zipping a jacket, tying a boot—become puzzles. The wind and cold at Xi’s location would have made setting up his shelter impossible. By then, only rescuers could save him.

A word about those who go to the rescue: When Ober got the call, a quick scan of the weather up high sent him straight to the region’s mountain rescue specialists. As they hurried to respond, they brought with them the kind of experience that few have. Yes, the winds and cold that they would work through made that work risky, but each of them had been there before. They knew the weight of wind and grip of cold; they knew how to work in and weather it. And, of course, they would not be alone.

A last word: solo. Xi’s choice to go alone up above treeline, and then to keep on despite the rugged wind and cold, trapped him. Had he been with another person or persons, there’s a chance their collective decision-making might have saved the day. A pair trapped on a similar day in late July 2021 offers an example: One of the pair sustained an injury, forcing them to stay out overnight. They were well equipped (as was Xi), but when the winds began to damage their tent, they worked together to relocate in the lee of a boulder; then they weathered a windy, 32-degree night. (See “Accidents,” Summer/Fall 2022, page 95.) Still, many of us will go up alone. The majority of my hikes are solo. So, with my gear, I also pack a resolve to stay well inside the envelope of my prior experience and a willingness to turn back or bail out; I also understand that I must accept that I have raised my risk.

―SS
The Thin Line

October 9 was just another day of running for 24-year-old David H.—in this case, a planned loop of the Rocky Branch drainage via White’s Ledge, Mount Stanton, Mount Langdon, Mount Parker, Stairs Mountain, the Davis Path, Mount Isolation, and a jaunt back to his home in Intervale via the Isolation Trail. Not a standard itinerary for a day in the Whites, or for ticking off a notably remote 4,000-footer, for that matter. David had other objectives as he set out: to explore new and unfamiliar trails near his house and to notch an all-day, 40-mile training run as preparation for December’s Ultra-Trail de México, a 100-kilometer race.

By early afternoon, David had already looped over Isolation and was on his way down the Isolation Trail, a relatively remote and little-traveled path that crosses the Rocky Branch of the Saco River several times. At one such crossing, David, descending, came upon two ascending hikers and their dog. As David later recounted it, he aimed to skirt the hikers and dog, and the dog came toward him; David veered away, jumping from boulder to boulder on the uphill side of the stream crossing. As he jumped to a larger boulder, he misjudged and fell, landing on his side and hitting his hip hard on the rocky streambed.

Convinced that he was uninjured and could walk out safely, David told the hiking group that he was unhurt and began walking downhill, turning east onto the Rocky Branch Trail to connect back to Route 16 in Pinkham Notch. But as the adrenaline from the boulder-hopping incident wore off, David found the pain in his hip growing severe. He could only limp downhill at an ever-slowing pace. David braced for a chilly October evening, putting on the few warm layers that he was carrying with him. He also accepted a fleece vest and waterproof pants from the hiking group when they encountered him on their descent, again assuring them that he could make it out under his own power.

By 3:30 p.m., with downhill progress still slower and more painful, David decided to call 911. NHFG officers soon made contact with David by cell phone and began to mobilize an Androscoggin Valley SAR team to carry a litter up the Rocky Branch Trail to meet him. The AVSAR hasty team met David just before 7 p.m. and aided his slow hobble downhill until a team with a rolling litter arrived an hour later. David was subsequently loaded into a litter and carried downhill to Route 16, arriving around 10:30 p.m.

Comment: David’s unlucky boulder-hopping incident speaks to the random, spontaneous moments when trouble crops up in the backcountry. In
the middle of an efficient, well-planned daylong outing, a moment of inattention, adaptation, or confusion can spell sudden disaster, even on seemingly innocuous terrain. David had successfully traversed technical terrain for many hours, yet the moment at the stream crossing presented different issues. He was well-prepared to handle the terrain on foot—and at a brisk pace—but once an injury made self-rescue challenging or impossible, the dynamics of his day changed rapidly, especially in corner-season weather. The day on nearby, albeit higher, Mount Washington averaged 25 degrees, with an inch-plus of snow and stiff northwest wind; the following day offered similar weather, so the night out would have been a chilly one.

As David later reflected, his lightly loaded running pack was adequate for a day’s loop through the Dry River but not for spending the night in the woods. On social media following the carryout, David discussed his feelings of unpreparedness during the incident and his plans to pack differently on future day trips to remote areas of the Whites. The carryout had made him starkly aware that, carrying neither minimal warm clothing nor an emergency kit, he could not have continued hobbling through the night, nor could he have stopped and made shelter. As David reflected afterward, “I never thought I would sustain an injury [while running] that I couldn’t walk out with.” So many of us—hikers, runners, and backpackers alike—can say the same: We plan for the best and barely contemplate the worst. David’s incident is a reminder of what it means to prepare for wilderness travel, even of the fastest, highest-exertion kind. Fortunately, with cell reception available and hyper-organized SAR teams on call, emergency services could make swift progress from phone call to mobilized rescue team to litter carry.

The stream crossing itself suggests a more subtle lesson about how innocuous moments can cause bigger problems. Sometimes a hiker or runner’s most hazardous encounters on trails are not the violent or jarring run-ins but the momentary distractions or shifts in focus, which lead to lost concentration and a snap decision gone wrong. As David later wrote on social media, “Running takes place on trails with other users, including canine ones. Avoiding them is part of the skill and risk associated.” As he acknowledges, though David’s run-in with the hikers and their dog may not have directly caused his fall, his brush with canine company may have tripped up his focus just long enough to spell trouble. And sometimes, deep in the woods with many miles to go, focus and concentration offer the only barrier between you and a very cold night in the Dry River Wilderness.

—SB
Slackfest Slide

On May 21, 2022, 37-year-old Kirsten H. and her ski partner Peter were enjoying a late-season visit to the high-alpine skiing on Mount Washington. The pair had driven up the Auto Road that Saturday morning, taking advantage of the remaining snow cover and the cleared road to access high-elevation Presidential Range skiing. This late-spring tradition, sometimes known as Slackfest, has grown increasingly popular in recent years, and Kirsten and Peter were not alone in their ski plans. The pair completed several runs on the low-angle East Snowfields. They started close to the summit of Washington and skied down to the plateau above Tuckerman Ravine. Then they set their ski tips northward, traversing toward the rim of the Great Gulf, heading for a popular chute called Airplane Gully.

The two began to descend Airplane Gully at approximately 2 p.m. Peter led, and he paused mid-run to shoot pictures of his companion. As he was setting up to take a photo, he watched Kirsten fall near the top of the ski run and accelerate down the center of the couloir. She slid some 700 feet before coming to a stop in some krummholz at a dogleg midway down the chute. Peter hastened down the chute toward her, while other skiers who had seen Kirsten fall quickly arrived to assist. Kirsten was not catastrophically injured from her 700-foot fall, but the assisting skiers noted that she had no memory of where she was and what had happened. She had laterally dislocated one of her knees in the slide and fractured her kneecap. While one skier with first-aid training stabilized her and splinted her knee, another skier, Nate K., a Jackson, New Hampshire, fire department captain, asked the assembled skiers whether any of them had cell phone service while in the Great Gulf. One did; Nate placed an emergency call and spoke with NHFG’s Lt. Ober about the extent of her injuries and the logistics of a rescue operation. Formulating a rescue plan, Nate asked Lt. Ober whether the Cog Railway could send a train to extract Kirsten from the Gulfside Trail.

While NHFG began coordinating a rescue and mobilizing an MRS response team, the assembled group of skiers—eight in total, all of whom had been independently skiing in the Great Gulf before Kirsten’s fall—teamed up to hoist Kirsten out of Airplane Gully. With her dislocated knee, Kirsten used one crampon on her uninjured leg to push herself upward while the assisting skiers hoisted her using webbing and slings as an improvised harness around her waist. The group worked quickly and collaboratively to hoist Kirsten, reaching the top of Airplane Gully around 4:30 p.m.—only two hours after
the accident. They then traversed the ridge to flag down a Cog Railway car for transport down Washington by 5 p.m., three hours after the accident occurred.

Comment: Kirsten and Peter chose a good day for their Slackfest trip to Washington, and by all accounts they had prepared soundly for both skiing off the low-angle summit cone and for the steeper ski lines in the Great Gulf. Though Kirsten had not skied Airplane Gully before, she may have fallen because her gear failed, not because she did not fully assess the risks involved. Peter later told NHFG officers that when he arrived at her side after the fall, one of her ski boots was in “walk” mode—the open-cuffed setting meant for flexibly walking uphill—which might have caused her to overbalance and fall when she attempted to turn. It was, however, unlikely that Kirsten had neglected to change the boot’s mode to “ski,” the stiff-cuffed descent setting, since she had already made several successful turns before she fell. What may have happened, Peter surmised, was that the boot mechanism malfunctioned, though as he admitted it was equally likely that the mechanism had broken or dislodged during the fall.

Whether or not Kirsten’s boot failed, the situation offers a sobering reminder to skiers to double- and triple-check gear settings before descending, especially on steeper runs where minor mistakes can result in consequential falls and slides. Once a skier is in motion, it can be difficult or impossible to stop and rectify an error. Backcountry skiers make a compulsive habit of confirming these systems before descending even benign slopes. On Mount Washington’s steep and unforgiving pitches, such habits become critical.

Kirsten and Peter found good weather and snow conditions for their late-season skiing—conditions that, thankfully for Kirsten, other skiers were enjoying. Nonetheless, Slackfest-style skiing presents the same risk of unpredictable conditions that any ski run does when approached from the top (see “Too Early in the Sun,” from this column, Winter/Spring 2023). A skier who is entering a steep and narrow pitch without having first climbed it from below gambles on decent conditions below, especially in more fickle, mid-winter or early-spring conditions. The pitch below could be glazed in an icy crust (a recipe for a long, sliding fall), chocked with wind-transported powder snow (with associated avalanche risk), or some unpredictable witch’s brew of conditions. The skier who ascends a run from below can check snow conditions, note treacherous spots, and make a specific plan for how to descend safely. In steep terrain, there’s no substitute for information.

—SB
Long Walk Short Ride

In early spring 2022, 29-year-old Rachel W. set out from Springer Mountain, Georgia, with her eyes on Katahdin. Like many in the Appalachian Trail thru-hiker class of 2022, she caught her share of gray days and also the lifts of trail magic, and by the time she reached the Whites five months into her journey, she had both routine and momentum in her favor. She camped near Mizpah Spring Hut on August 28. The next morning, she hiked along the rock-rough Crawford Path on the south side of Mount Eisenhower. There, Rachel slipped and injured her leg severely.

The early day was mild up high and clear, and, along the AT in the August mountains, Rachel’s trail friends appeared soon after her fall. Lacking cell phone coverage at that spot, they stopped a passing hiker and asked him to find a place with reception and phone for help. The passerby did so around 9:30 a.m., relaying that Rachel could not bear any weight on her injured leg and her location to NHFG CO Matthew Holmes. Holmes calculated that Rachel was nearly four miles from the nearest trailhead, and he said that getting to her would take some time. He then set about organizing the rescue.

As Holmes made his calls, he had an eye also on the weather, which was slated to be clear but hot, perhaps a problem for a long litter carry. While Holmes worked in the valley, the Appalachian Mountain Club’s Mizpah Spring Hut crew* sent two of its members to aid Rachel. Holmes then requested and received permission to contact the ARNG to see if they could accomplish the rescue via helicopter. ARNG said they would send a Black Hawk and try the rescue via hoist.

While the helicopter crew members readied themselves, Holmes had ground rescuers traveling to trailheads in case the helicopter rescue failed. Just after 12:30 p.m., the helicopter was in the air, and around 1:15 p.m., using coordinates from the earlier call, the crew had located Rachel and hoisted her aboard. They landed a few minutes later at the Crawford Notch Department of Transportation shed, where Rachel was transferred to an ambulance and taken to a hospital.

Comment: Many of this column’s injuries stem from hiking’s episodic nature. Most of us get to our trails for a day or two or, perhaps at the outside, a week; then we go home, where we lose our trail rhythm and, at times, our fitness. When we go out and up at some later date and pull a muscle or take a tumble, we often say, “If I got out more and longer, this wouldn’t happen.”

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*AMC huts’ unique spelling of crew.
Except, of course, that it does, even to thru-hikers who have been walking steadily for five months. In her NHFG interview, Rachel mentioned the rugged nature of the Whites. For some perspective, I asked another class of 2022 thru-hiker for her take on arriving in the Whites with lots of miles under her shoes. Here's some of what my cousin “Fireball” (aka, Liz), who completed the AT on September 16 as a 60th birthday present to herself, had to say:

I believed that by the time I had walked from Georgia to NH (1,758 miles) I would be so very physically (and mentally) fit that I would have very little trouble conquering all fourteen of the New Hampshire 4,000 peaks on the AT.

WRONG! Hiking the Whites compared with the past eleven states was vastly different. Sharp ascents followed dizzying descents on narrow and rocky terrain with exposed ledges. I needed scrambling skills. One hour of hiking in the Whites often equaled a mile, whereas in other states, I’d averaged 2 to 4 miles per hour. White blazes that had seemed plentiful in other states were hard to find in New Hampshire, I often had to stop and find my bearings. Then, the long stretches above treeline also meant weather became an important consideration; I had to pause a number of times to let bad weather pass. Lastly, I never felt fear until I crossed over into New Hampshire. That fear grew steadily throughout until I got over Mount Madison.

On the plus side, which was huge, I have to say that while PUDS (pointless ups and downs) were a constant before New Hampshire, in the Whites, with each of the fourteen 4,000 peaks, there were stunning vistas. With them came a greater love and respect for the trail, and that was and is an incredible gift.

I had heard similar stories about reaching the Whites, but I think our sometimes ground-down, glacier-split mountains get underrated for difficulty until someone arrives with a whole lot of recent experience in other mountains and says, “Whoa, these are tough trails.”

—SS

**Food Is Fuel**

One of the summer’s more protracted incidents took place near Madison Spring Hut on July 10, 2022. Early that morning, 36-year-old Eva Marie M. and her friend Nona C. caught a shuttle to the Appalachia trailhead on Route 2 and climbed the Air Line Trail toward Mount Adams on their way to Lakes
of the Clouds Hut and a two-day traverse of the Presidential Range. The day broke clear and mild.

By mid-morning the pair was near Madison Spring Hut, and Eva Marie was experiencing some nausea; they decided to go to the hut and rest there. Over time, Eva Marie felt worse and worse and couldn’t keep food down. The pair abandoned the idea of going to Lakes of the Clouds and then on to Crawford Notch. With no room available at Madison, they decided to walk back down the Valley Way, leaving the hut around 2 p.m. By 4:45 p.m. they’d made little progress and Eva Marie then said she could go no farther. Nona asked passing hikers to report the problem to the Madison croo, and she called the AMC’s Highland Center as well. NHFG got word that a hiker was ill and in need of rescue just before 5:30 p.m.

What followed was a large callout of volunteer rescuers and, eventually, as Eva Marie’s condition worsened, a helicopter rescue. This air response followed an 8:12 p.m. phone call from AMC’s SAR coordinator, saying that hut croo and rescuers who had reached the scene felt Eva Marie was in real danger.

Ground rescuers kept arriving and soon there were enough to relocate Eva Marie to a place where the helicopter hoist would be easier. The Black Hawk made the hoist rescue at little after 10:30 p.m., taking Eva Marie to Gorham’s airfield, where an ambulance met them and took her to Androscoggin Valley Hospital. As the night wore on, Eva Marie eventually ended up in a DHART helicopter and at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, where her husband later reported that doctors had been able to stabilize her. Her husband said also that Eva Marie’s life-threatening decline was brought on by her eating only one candy peanut butter cup during the entire day of the climb and rescue, even as she was reported to have had plenty of water.

The puzzlement in this incident lies in what seems a slow decline that finally became a crisis. Eva Marie’s hiking companion is a physician’s assistant, and, during her initial conversations with NHFG and AMC, she mentioned that Eva Marie had eaten nothing all day. The pair tried to remedy this while at the hut, but Eva Marie couldn’t keep food down. That remained true as they sought to descend.

NHFG Lt. Ober, who began organizing Eva Marie’s rescue after he received the late-afternoon call, pointed out that even at that point, she was lucid and simply feeling unwell, albeit not strong enough to climb down the Valley Way. It seemed that she would need a routine—though long—carryout, and Ober summoned rescuers. Eva Marie’s decline as night came on made Ober shift to the helicopter rescue.
Comment: Patient privacy demands that official reports and this column omit many medical details, which may make this account somewhat unsatisfying, but suffice it to say she grew very sick. We include it as caution against waiting too long when trouble arises. A pause to see if the trouble abates? Yes, we often recommend that, as the accelerant of injury and anxiety has people reaching for their phones quickly. But when that trouble slows one to moving at a tenth of a mile per hour over nearly three hours, the wait’s been too long.

What appears to have happened is a weakening from lack of food that turned later into a cascade of trouble. Hiking up demanding trails asks a lot of our bodies. How we care for and fuel those bodies takes careful attention and practice.

—SS

Air Support

The prior two incidents and two to follow point to an increase in helicopter use in White Mountain SAR. As I reviewed the season’s incidents, deciding which to include in our column, I began to keep track of those asking for heli-help; by review’s end, they numbered thirteen, with eleven involving the ARNG and the other two Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center’s DHART helicopter. As column readers know, the Army helicopters carry within the capability for hoisting accident victims from places where the copters cannot land; the DHART helicopter, too small to contain a hoist, must land to take on an injured person.

Also, as I learned during 2017 visits to both ARNG’s Concord base and DHART’s deployment center in Hanover, both helicopters do their work without charging the agency leading the rescue. ARNG values the training its crews get flying and working over challenging terrain, and DHART sees its work as a public service offshoot of its primary role, which is to transfer patients from and to medical facilities across the state. An ARNG pilot told me that, when deployed in Afghanistan, ARNG crews were rated among the best and deployed as such because they had mountain-flight experience that translated directly to Afghan terrain.

We are also aware, from conversations with NHFG’s Col. Kevin Jordan, that they are careful not to over-ask for helicopter help, reserving requests for help to time-sensitive emergencies and grueling, people-intensive carryouts. Helicopters are not simply “on call” whenever we, the public, feel like calling.

—SS
Up High

On May 14, 2022, just after 4 p.m., NHFG Lt. Kneeland received a report that Andrea D., age 34, had slipped on some ice near the junction of the Old Bridle Path and Greenleaf Trail. Andrea reported that she could not continue on her own and was being helped back toward Greenleaf Hut by passersby; she also reported that she had been a medic in the Army. At the same time, Kneeland got another call saying another hiker, William H. (whose age was not reported), had fallen on the Old Bridle Path not far below Andrea and also needed help. A strong storm was advancing on the area.

Kneeland knew that ARNG had just accomplished an airlift off Mount Cube, and he asked if they might add a flight to Greenleaf to their day. This would avoid possibly two long carryouts and their labor-intensive work. The helicopter crew flew next toward Greenleaf, but they were rebuffed by the storm. Kneeland called in the ground rescuers.

Initial rescuers were able to help the hiker lower on the Old Bridle Path descend without a litter carry, which freed up the rest of the responding rescuers. Rescuers had gathered in sufficient numbers by early evening, and at a little before 8 p.m., they began to carry Andrea down, arriving at the trailhead just before midnight.

Comment: As is clear from reading reports and our talking with rescuers, handling more than one rescue at a time is common in the Whites, especially on weekends. Here, Lt. Kneeland worked on two close to each other on a Saturday when spring ice was causing hikers to slip. That only one rescue required a carryout after bad weather rebuffed the helicopter was a blessing. Remember, it typically takes six people to carry a litter, and they often have to walk beside the trail rather than on it; those six then need relief from the arm burn and footwork of carrying after, let’s say, five minutes. So, the next six step forward; some minutes later, crew number 3 of rescuers takes its turn. Hard, labor-intensive work for sure.

That Andrea had the medical training to offer clear understanding of her injury helped greatly in organizing this rescue.

—SS

Mountaintop Landing

On July 17, 2022, NHFG got word that a hiker near the top of Mount Pierce was suffering a medical emergency. Sixty-year-old John S. and two hiking friends he’d met online had climbed the Crawford Path without incident that
morning, but after reaching Mizpah Spring Hut and starting for the summit of Pierce, John had felt ill. John rested, drank water, and attempted to continue, but his symptoms intensified. One of his hiking group, a cardiac nurse, assessed John and suggested they call for help; the call came into NHFG at 2:30 p.m. Based on his severe symptoms, Lt. Ober asked for a helicopter attempt.

Clear calm weather made the flight to Pierce routine, but the helicopter crew had trouble locating John in the thick scrub, and radio communications with ground rescuers didn’t get through. The helicopter flew down to AMC’s Highland Center, where they picked up NHFG Lt. Robert Mancini and flew back up to Pierce. Mancini was able to reach ground rescuers, and the helicopter pilot landed atop Pierce and retrieved John, flying him directly to Littleton for care. John S. later reported that he’d been released from the hospital.

**Comment:** This was a classic helicopter rescue brought on by the need for speedy response. Communication glitches forced the rescuers to adjust, but that is part of the training that pilots and crews seek when they help New Hampshire’s searchers and rescuers. John S. was prepared for his hike, and his companions and rescuers responded readily when the trouble he encountered outstripped any preparations.

---SS
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