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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*



August, 14, 2023, Mount Moosilauke alpine zone. Twice the cloud lid dropped lower onto two hikers, dampening them in minutes as they walked through 25-MPH winds. It is a reminder how quickly conditions change above treeline, even on a blue-sky day.

MICHENADER SYLVAIN

Slippery Summer

Slips and falls account for a significant number of the accidents logged annually in the White Mountains, but the summer of 2023 saw more than its share. Of the 68 incidents New Hampshire Fish and Game reported in its news releases between May 1 and October 31, a full 37 of them were the result of slipping, skidding, or sliding into trouble on the greased roots and slick

rocks of wet trails. One is tempted, then, to blame the recurrent rains and advise avoidance of water. But paraphrasing an old Scottish saying—if you don't go out in the mist and rain, you never go out at all—we suggest looking elsewhere for a margin of safety.

All but the most desperate kind of slippage begins with the sole . . . of your foot. There, the tread meets the trail. How well you understand and feel this meeting often determines where you end up on a given day. So the next time you head out for a walk, or run, or climb, take a few minutes to examine the tread of the shoe you will wear. Consider its points of contact, its edges, its flex, its wear. How long have you and shoe been a pair? When and where are you confident of your shoe's grip? Where and when are you wary? And then ask yourself how well you read a trail's surfaces. Can you sort the slippery from the stable?

Like many with a foot habit, we both have a library of slips, moments when we slid—even if only a fraction of an inch—toward trouble or reached it. While you examine your sole, thumb through your library. Pick a story and retell it to yourself. What were you wearing? What were the day's conditions? What did you carry away?

—Sandy Stott, *Accidents Editor*

—Scott Berkley, *Assistant Accidents Editor*

(Only) One Step

Here's one short story from August 2023: Below Cardigan Mountain I did a five-mile loop up by the cellar hole and down the Back 80 by Cardigan Lodge and over to Welton Falls. Live legs on a heavy air day, with lots of free water on the trails and so, mud. But I caught a very good rhythm, which either spawned or was spawned by very good focus, an up-cadence mindfulness. To the point where I made only one (only one!) misstep during the initial three trail miles. I call this memory “(Only) One Step” because that seems the right title for an essay on the nearness of trouble to the joy and the rightness of being in rhythm and mindful on a trail. So close. So related?

The step: A diagonal placement with my left foot landed on a left-slanting rounded stone, whose surface was not slick, but roughened, but whose angle I misgauged. So, when my foot landed and I began to weight toward it, the force of my weight came at an angle too, instead of from above. The thrust pushed the left foot along the surface of the stone, and the angle also limited the amount of surface of the sole touching the stone. Meaning it slipped.

But, even as I'd placed my foot I'd known it wasn't right, was mindful of mistake, and so I didn't weight the left foot fully; the slippage then stalled, and because I am now a quadruped, two feet and two poles, I had only the slightest trouble shifting my weight to the left pole, then canting my weight back to my right foot and pole, using the left pole (solid, unlike the left foot) as correcting force, and keeping rhythm. Still, the moment stays with me.

—SS

Lean on Me

Sometimes, it's not your day. That was true for Sarah Z., age 47, on June 9, 2023, the third day of a planned hike from Pinkham Notch to Katahdin to complete her final section of the Appalachian Trail, a project begun five years earlier. With three hiking companions gathered via Facebook, Sarah was working her way down the Rattle River Trail when the group arrived at a brook crossing. They searched to find a crossing where they could keep their feet dry, and as Sarah readied to cross, she set her trekking poles to support a jump. With all her weight on the poles, one snapped, pitching Sarah straight down to a face-first landing on the rocks. The impact knocked her out.

Sarah's companions responded immediately, and one, Martin E., an emergency room doctor, recommended Sarah's rescue. Another companion, James B., ran downhill for 45 minutes until he found phone reception and called for help. The group then stayed together as rescuers gathered.

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

A little after 1:30 P.M., NHFG Lt. Mark Ober talked with the runner, James B., who gave him a detailed sense of what had happened, and Ober then called in two conservation officers and Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue volunteers for help. CO Levi Frye climbed away at 2:45 P.M. and reached Sarah's group at 3:30 P.M., confirming that they would have to carry her out. By 4:15 P.M., the rescuers had begun the carryout, and AVSAR's Mike Pelchat radioed that Ober should send an ambulance to the trailhead. The rescuers arrived there at 5:05 P.M., and Ober was able to talk with Sarah and her three companions before she was taken to Androscoggin Valley Hospital for treatment.

Comment: This incident is notable both for the cautionary moment of equipment failure and the efficiency of the rescue. That Sarah and her companions were experienced and equipped made this rescue much easier for NHFG and AVSAR. The hikers provided accurate medical assessment, and they worked with rescuers throughout the ordeal. And, from working together on many rescues, NHFG and AVSAR are a well-oiled, go-get-'em machine.

After digesting this story, I pulled out my usual trekking poles and looked them over. They are aluminum, more than 10 years old, and they've probed a good number of miles over those years. I also own a pair of carbon fiber poles, now going on 5 years old; their primary (and dwindling) use is trail running. The aluminum poles are, of course, heavier, which accounts, in part, for the carbon poles' popularity. But the aluminum ones, if damaged, tend to bend, whereas the carbon poles snap. As Sarah's accident makes clear, "bend" beats "snap" when it comes to pole failure.

One added consideration: A multiday backpack is liable to increase your weight by 30 or more pounds, and so the pressure on your poles is more severe than the everyday weight you are. Product reviews available online give test results for stressed poles; they are worth reading as you consider buying and using poles. Walkers, unlike technical climbers, are less used to equipment review. But one's awareness of what's being asked of a pole and its overall structure seems an important facet of pole use.

—SS

Easy Access

July 14, 2023, was warm, and, like many summer days, it felt expansive with its mix of sun and cloud. Veronica H., age 58, and her husband, Bruce, took

the Cog Railway to Mount Washington's summit and then opted to hike down the mountain, aiming first for the Appalachian Mountain Club's Lakes of the Clouds Hut and then the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail.

After lunch at the hut, they headed down. Their descent grew slower, and at a little before 8 P.M. Bruce called for help, saying that his wife was dehydrated and barely moving down. NHFG's Sgt. Glen Lucas called back and got details from Bruce. Lucas then advised the couple to keep moving down as best they could and that they should call 911 every 15 minutes so their descent could be tracked. Lucas then called AMC and asked that they send two runners down from Lakes of the Clouds with food, fluids, and headlamps.

As Lucas tracked the couple via their coordinates, the AMC hut crew* members ran down, reaching the pair around 9:40 P.M. After their delivery, forecast rain and lightning sent the AMC runners back up to the hut so they wouldn't be crossing open ground in a lightning storm. A little while later, Bruce called to say that Veronica couldn't go on. Lucas then called in CO Matthew Holmes and personnel from Twin Mountain Fire and Rescue. The rescuers reached the couple at 11 P.M. It took hand-in-hand assistance and two more hours to get Veronica down to the parking area. Twin Mountain personnel recommended that she go to Littleton Regional Hospital to be checked out, and an ambulance was summoned to do so.

Two and a half weeks later, on August 1, 47-year-old Aron I. rode up the Auto Road to the summit of Mount Washington. Once there, he decided to hike down the Tuckerman Ravine Trail and meet some friends who were climbing up from the base. Just below the junction with the Lion Head Trail, Aron slipped on a rock, injuring his lower leg. Unable to walk, Aron called for help; at 4:45 P.M. Lucas called back and, after learning where Aron was and that he was carrying no equipment or extra clothing, Lucas set a rescue in motion. The day's weather added a degree of haste: The 39-degree temperature averaged 11 degrees below normal, and, as usual, the wind was a factor, though the 25 MPH average reads as benign for Washington.

Lucas had three NHFG COs and volunteers from AVSAR respond. In addition eleven SOLO wilderness first-aid students volunteered, and all the rescuers gathered at the base of the Auto Road, where the COs drove them to the summit. AVSAR and CO Holmes reached Aron at 7:20; by 7:30, they had stabilized his injury and packed him into a litter. The rescuers reached the

*AMC huts' unique spelling of "crew."

summit at 8:35 P.M. From there, NHFG ferried Aron and the rescuers back to the base of the mountain; Aron went from there to Androscoggin Valley Hospital with Gorham Emergency Services.

Comment: Mount Washington has a version, the reverse really, of the Grand Canyon effect, and that effect seems to be growing. At the Canyon, rangers and rescuers will offer numerous stories of people who hike down into the canyon, often on days with extreme weather, and then find deep difficulty when they turn to climb out. “We send helicopters down there all the time,” one said wearily to me during a long-ago visit.

It all seems so easy at the outset. In both of these Mount Washington incidents, easy access to the summit spawned a sense of possibility: Let’s just walk down; gravity’s on our side!

But, just as people unaccustomed to hiking find real woe climbing out of the Grand Canyon on a hot day, or amid a storm, so too can those who rode cars or trains up Washington get into trouble on the impromptu descents. It takes only a short time before someone descending Washington reaches tough ground. And, as those with lots of miles under their feet will agree, going downhill is often more demanding than climbing: The steps are longer, the impact of footfall more abrupt, heavier, and the cost of slipping is often magnified. Falling uphill is usually a very short trip; the downhill cousin can cover real distance. Also, downhill travel, even if one has not climbed on foot, usually takes place later in the day when energy stores are depleted and muscles less resilient.

In both incidents, the downhill took its toll, one time by increments, the other time by slippage. That neither Veronica and Bruce nor Aron was prepared to be slowed or stuck compounded the risk each endured. Aron, exposed to hypothermic possibility and without any pack or added clothing and supplies, was at real risk had rescuers not been quick to get to him.

—SS

Wet and Getting Wetter

At 6:30 P.M. on the evening of May 20, 2023, NHFG received a call from Elizabeth O., age 28, who was struggling to erect her tent at about 3,300 feet of elevation on the Dicey’s Mill Trail on Mount Passaconaway. Elizabeth told CO Lt. Bradley Morse that she had fallen into a stream (likely the Wonalan-cet River) while traversing from the Tripyramids across Mount Whiteface to Passaconaway, soaking all the overnight gear that she had brought with her,

and that deep snow on the ridge between the peaks had made for slow and draining travel. Elizabeth had stopped for the night at the base of the Passaconaway summit cone with rain and wind increasing at upper elevations. In the wind, however, she could not erect her tent and had crawled into her sodden sleeping bag to stay warm. Concerned that her cold and wet predicament would worsen overnight and upset by the need to place an emergency phone call, Elizabeth requested the assistance of NHFG to help extricate her before her hypothermia deepened.

NHFG responded swiftly given the worsening weather, sending two officers up the Dickey's Mill Trail to meet Elizabeth where she had stopped. The officers reached her at 10 P.M., and the trio swiftly descended 3.6 miles to the trailhead on the south side of the Sandwich Range—in less than an hour and a half—a testament to Elizabeth's calling 911 before hypothermia had rendered her immobile.

Comment: Elizabeth's brush with hypothermia was just the start of an extremely wet summer for hikers, and the corner-season conditions for her Sandwich Range hike exacerbated the storm that came upon her. Postholing through snow and wading through swollen streams leaches away warmth and drains a hiker of energy, even without a fall into a stream to top it all off. Elizabeth had chosen an ambitious late-spring itinerary, ascending into the Sandwich Range from the north via the Downes Brook Trail before going across the Sleepers to the Tripyramids, then returning to traverse Mounts Whiteface and Passaconaway. This route would challenge hikers even on dry trails with perfect footing. Elizabeth did not lack fitness and fortitude; her problem was weather and stream-crossing missteps.

Setting up camp in difficult conditions can be an unanticipated challenge. When we get our equipment and set it up in the living room or backyard, it snaps into shape easily, predictably. A couple of episodes making camp in windy rain or snow point to a new skill set. It may sound borderline silly, but next time the wind's up and it's raining, take your tent out back and set it up, all the while making note of what those conditions force upon you as you work.

To the north, the Mount Washington Observatory recorded almost 1 inch of rain during Elizabeth's hike, with wind gusts up to 75 MPH. Elizabeth had the presence of mind to call 911 while she still had the mental clarity, unmuddled by hypothermic confusion. A few wet hours later, the situation with a soaked sleeping bag and un-pitched tent may have been much different.

—SB

You Don't Have to Go Far

On June 3, 2023, New Hampshire residents Bryan M. and Sam N., husband and wife, drove north a number of exits, parked at the Old Bridle Path/Falling Waters Trail lot, and set out for a two-day loop that would take them up to Little Haystack Mountain and south along the Franconia Ridge Trail/Appalachian Trail to Liberty Spring Tentsite, where they planned to spend the night. On day two, they would descend the Liberty Spring Trail and walk north on the Pemi Trail back to their car. They set out around noon on this cool, cloudy day.

At 9:30 P.M., not far south of Little Haystack's summit, they called 911.

NHFG Sgt. Heidi Murphy returned the call and learned that both hikers were cold and that Sam couldn't walk anymore. Murphy gathered more facts, coached them to eat more, and explained how to collect dry wood for a fire from dead tree branches rather than wet wood from the ground. She asked if they could use their tent and sleeping bags and get through the night. The couple said that everything was wet and that they were too cold to do this; they estimated the temperature to be in the 30s. Murphy set about putting together a small rescue party.

At 11:25 P.M. two NHFG COs climbed away from the road, up the Falling Waters Trail; at midnight another CO and PVSAR volunteer Mark Roland followed. A little after 1:15 A.M. CO Rusty Talbot reached the stranded couple. He got them to change clothes and warm up. By then, Talbot reported, Bryan had a large fire going. At 1:40 A.M. Talbot and the couple started down; CO Jonathan Demler stayed behind to put out the fire and pack up the couple's tent. Around 2:45 A.M. the descending party met the other two rescuers; they all continued down, reaching the trailhead at 5:42 A.M.

Comment: Even the timeline of their ascent makes it clear that Bryan and Sam had taken on too much. From setting out somewhere around noon, they climbed for seven and a half hours before reaching Haystack's summit. The Falling Waters Trail is a demanding one, rising 3,000 vertical feet in 3.2 miles; *White Mountain Guide* time is just over 3 hours. The couple's pace of under a half-mile per hour suggests that this trail was too big an ask for their level of fitness. That Bryan called for help because Sam could no longer walk underlines this supposition.

Our purpose in chronicling this incident returns to the summer of 2023's theme of water's effects and threats. Bryan and Sam carried overnight equipment up this mountain, but when they needed its warmth and shelter, they found it wet from the day's showery weather and the cold fog of evening.

Experienced backpackers know various ways of keeping clothing and bedding dry and functional; it's a lesson not to be overlooked. That Bryan and Sam also had on predominantly cotton clothing added to the evening's thermal threat. Finally, Sgt. Murphy's fire-building tutorial over the phone did help Bryan turn a sputtering fire into the large one reported by CO Talbot, enough to have seen the couple through the night. Erring on the side of caution made good sense given the level of inexperience Sgt. Murphy knew she was dealing with from those phone conversations.

—SS

Off Course

A 9 P.M. call on July 14, 2023, asked for NHFG's help for Matthew B., age 21, who said that he'd fallen approximately 30 feet off a ledge as he'd tried to climb back to the summit of Cannon Mountain. Matthew told Lt. Jim Kneeland that he'd lost the trail while descending on the Kinsman Ridge Trail and had turned around to try to rediscover the trail. Now he was injured from his initial fall, stuck on a steep ledge, and worried that if he moved, he'd fall a lot farther. The coordinates of the call (44.1529155N-071.702418W) showed Matthew to be 500 feet west of the trail on a steep ledgy part of the mountain. He reported that he was alone and had 10 percent left on his phone battery. Kneeland set about organizing a rescue and told Matthew he'd call back when the rescue team was on its way to him.

At 10:30 P.M. Kneeland started up the Cannon Mountain access road on an all-terrain vehicle; with him were NHFG CO Christopher McKee and two volunteers from Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue. From the mountaintop, CO McKee and the two PVSAR rescuers headed down toward Matthew's phone coordinates on foot. Kneeland drove back to the base to pick up a litter and CO Jim Cyr. By 11:15, Kneeland and Cyr were back atop Cannon and headed down trail on foot toward Matthew. CO McKee then called and said they had made voice contact with Matthew, but that they might need Mountain Rescue Service to reach Matthew safely. Kneeland climbed back up Cannon to make that call. At the same time PVSAR's Allan Clark had arranged to have the Cannon Tramway ready to take Matthew and his rescuers to the base when they reached the mountaintop.

The rescuers called at a little after midnight, saying they'd been able to reach Matthew and felt they could lower him safely from the ledge. Kneeland then canceled the MRS callout. It took rescuers nearly an hour and a half

to bring Matthew back to the trail. Once on the trail, Matthew could walk with assistance and roped support on steep sections. Around 3 A.M., the party reached the summit and tram; at 3:05 A.M. they reached the base, where a summoned ambulance met them.

Comment: Matthew described himself as an inexperienced hiker, and his day and night on Cannon bore this out. He'd learned of the mountain from a colleague at work, and after driving to Franconia Notch, he'd set out around 11:30 A.M., topping out on Cannon around 2 P.M. He'd then begun descending the Kinsman Ridge Trail and lost it. Around 5 P.M. he started back uphill to rediscover the trail and found himself in thick scrub mixed with boulders and ledges. As he climbed one steep section, a handhold broke off and he fell, injuring his upper body significantly on impact. Matthew carried no map, light, or rain gear, significant omissions as rain and lightning punctuated the rescue effort. He was following a compass bearing on his phone when he fell.

There's little further comment needed other than to note that the Kinsman Ridge Trail is a tough one, and, as with many tough trails, the terrain just off-trail is often dangerous. Both Matthew and his father, who flew out from their Illinois home to be with Matthew while he recovered at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, expressed deep gratitude to the rescuers.

—SS

What Blazes?

At midday on July 26, 2023, a hiker descending north from the summit of East Osceola heard cries for help coming from the exposed ledges to the east of the trail. NHFG Lt. Jim Kneeland advised the reporting hiker to tell the distressed party to stay put and call 911. The hiker in distress, Misty H., age 49, called Kneeland shortly afterward, explaining that she had been following the navigation app on her phone when she found herself "cliffed out" in ledgy terrain with no way to retreat. Fortunately, Misty could safely remain where she was until three COs could respond to the call. By 3 P.M., the COs had located Misty on the East Osceola ledges and belayed her out of steep terrain, allowing the group to descend on foot back to the Greeley Ponds trailhead.

After conversing with Misty on the descent from East Osceola, the responding COs reported that she had minimal experience hiking in the Northeast and was unfamiliar with the use of painted blazes to mark a trail corridor. Instead of following the blazes, she had followed the line of the

Mount Osceola Trail as it appeared on the AllTrails app she was using on her phone. In crossing several ledgy stretches while ascending East Osceola, Misty had relied on her phone to guide her across the bedrock and back to clear, forested treadways. When her phone had failed to update with precision, or perhaps the digital map had reoriented itself quickly and disoriented the user, Misty had followed the digi-trail away from the marked path.

Comment: Misty's off-trail ledge debacle marks another point of caution about navigating by cell phone app—an ever-more-common theme in this column. The fallibility of such omnipresent navigation apps as AllTrails, Gaia, Avenza, and OnX comes in many forms: The app may glitch and not load the hiker's position in real time; the overlay of satellite location and map detail may be inexact; the orientation and topography of the map itself may be misleading. Some healthy skepticism toward what a digital map recommends or how it directs the hiker makes great sense, but before turning to or relying on the app, the first step is to take stock of what is visually apparent as a navigational aid. And though they may seem hopelessly old school, paper maps are still the recommended way to know and find your way in the mountains.

—SB

A Turn to Be Helped

July 8, 2023, was a hot day in the Carter Range, when a group of Massachusetts friends pushed off on a planned two-day hike from the northern end beneath Mount Moriah. Stephen F., age 49, was one of nine hikers, and he was closing in on completion of his 4,000-footers. As the group approached the summit of Moriah, Stephen felt unwell; then he lapsed into unconsciousness. His friends, many with first responder medical training, came quickly to his aid, and soon they determined that he needed more help than they could offer.

The message from state police reached NHFG Lt. Mark Ober at 1:10 P.M., and, a few minutes later, Ober was able to get to cell coverage that allowed him to call the contact number. There, he got one of Stephen's friends, Maya D., who identified herself as an emergency medical technician. With Maya's information, Ober next called New Hampshire Army National Guard with the hope of Black Hawk helicopter assistance. At 2 P.M. ARNG's Col. Dave Mattimore called Ober to let him know they were scrambling a crew, and that it would be about two hours before they could fly.

Ober then shifted to assembling a foot rescue in case the helicopter couldn't reach the group. The 90-degree heat was already generating afternoon storm cells in the high peaks, even as Moriah remained clear.

Ober's next calls went to AVSAR and NHFG CO Levi Frye. While AVSAR put out a call for volunteers, Frye went to the trailhead of the Carter-Moriah Trail in Gorham and started up on his ATV. As the afternoon wore on, the clouds thickened and Stephen's companions noted no improvement. At 3:55 P.M. the Black Hawk flew north from Concord; at 4:20 P.M. CO Frye, who had used the ATV for the first 1.5 miles, reached Stephen and the group on foot. The Black Hawk arrived in the area at the same time. Frustratingly, the weather kept the helicopter from landing on the summit or hovering to lower a hoist, and the Black Hawk had to go to Berlin Regional Airport to refuel and then await improved weather. As this unfolded, AVSAR volunteers kept arriving at the trailhead, signing in, and then hiking toward Stephen's group.

Atop Moriah, the clouds brought heavy rain, and the group kept a tarp over Stephen for protection. At 6:20 P.M., the helicopter pilot decided to return to his base. Ober's 6:45 P.M. call to CO Frye found Stephen had regained consciousness but was unable to try descending.

At a little after 7 P.M. the litter arrived, and a group of volunteers and hiking party members began the long carryout. Thunderstorms and heavy rain doused the rescuers, and the carry took five hours to reach the parked ATV. Rescuers got Stephen to a waiting ambulance at 12:35 A.M.

Comment: In a CBS television interview from his hospital bed at Massachusetts General Hospital, Stephen credited his friends and rescuers with saving his life. He went on to say that the heat had overwhelmed him and that, in retrospect, he should have turned back during the long climb of Moriah. That recognition was, of course, hard won, and it asks us all to consider what turning back entails.

Often, it is an internal conversation with oneself, weighing the day's goals against the sense of oncoming trouble. For Stephen this would have been complicated further by being one of a group of nine who were at the outset of a two-day hike. "If I turn around," he might have thought, "what happens with and for the others? Does it kill the trip? For some? For everyone?" Social and group dynamics make our thinking multifaceted, and, unless there is a strict command structure to direct us, we "feel" our way to answer. The pressure to go on would have been considerable.

Once Stephen got in trouble, he was blessed by being with his group. Among the eight others were trained first responders, including the EMT

who spoke with NHFG's Lt. Ober. In a different interview, Ober reflected, "It was very nice to know that there were medically trained people on scene who were not overexaggerating the symptoms." That confidence allowed Ober to respond with full conviction.

—SS

Quick Decline

Summer weather surprises are common in the Whites, but that offers little protection from them for the inexperienced. August 11, 2023, was just such a day on Mount Madison. The nearby Mount Washington Observatory recorded an average temperature of 44 with a low of 40, winds from the west averaging 60 MPH (top gust of 90), .45 inches of rain, and complete cloud and fog cover. Not what most of us call "summery." Still, that weather waited above, and low on the ridge, Jason A., age 21, set out around 10:30 A.M. from the Osgood Tentsite with his two friends, Kasper G. and Aiden C., to climb over Mount Madison to Madison Spring Hut. This was to be day two of a three-day backpacking trip.

From the tentsite's 2,500-foot elevation to treeline, the three hiked steadily. Jason was carrying a heavy pack, but his friends said that aside from taking occasional breaks, he kept plugging along uphill and seemed fine. As they rose above treeline, the wind intensified, and according to Kasper, it became "much more difficult." Both Jason and Aiden began to struggle. Kasper suggested that Aiden go ahead to the hut, which Aiden did. After traversing Mount Madison, Aiden reached Madison Spring Hut and immediately alerted the croo that his hiking companions, out on the ridge, were less mobile and alarmingly vulnerable to the elements. The croo noted Aiden's incipient hypothermia and the fear in his voice while recounting the events of the day and helped calm and re-warm him while formulating a plan to assist Kasper and Jason.

Back on the Osgood Trail, Kasper relieved Jason of his heavy pack and set off to carry it up to the summit. When Kasper returned for his own pack, he found Jason some yards off-trail and seemingly disoriented. Kasper set about helping Jason, who continued to struggle. Kasper asked Jason if he wanted to turn back; Jason said no. They kept going. Kasper repeated the offer to go back down. Jason refused. Kasper noticed that Jason's attention was wandering and some of his speech was unintelligible. An Appalachian Trail thru-hiker, who continued to assist throughout the rescue, appeared

in the fog and mist and tried to help, offering water and some food. Jason thanked her and appeared to struggle with the food and water. He then sat down on a rock. Soon after that, around 1,500 feet east of Madison's summit, Jason collapsed. As Kasper and the thru-hiker tried to help Jason, another passing hiker called 911. At 4:37 P.M., NHFG Sgt. Glen Lucas got the message about that call, which was subsequently relayed to AMC's search-and-rescue dispatch at Pinkham Notch Visitor Center.

With the information Lucas received, he understood it to be a time-sensitive emergency and immediately called ARNG for helicopter help. ARNG's Col. Dave Mattimore said they would scramble a team and head north. Lucas's next calls went to two COs and AVSAR to gather an alternative should the clouds and wind prevent the helicopter rescue. The AVSAR foot rescuers would head toward the Appalachia trailhead parking lot and start up the Valley Way.

Lucas then headed for the field at the base of the Mount Washington Auto Road, where he planned to meet the two COs and the helicopter. His scan of the weather on the ridges above made him skeptical that the helicopter could get to Jason's location. Plan B would have the helicopter fly COs Matthew Holmes and Eric Fluette as far up as possible to shorten their hike to Jason. Meanwhile, the Pinkham Notch SAR dispatch alerted the Madison croo that Kasper was attempting to resuscitate Jason where he had collapsed. The croo sent a hasty team—composed of Madison hutmaster Tasha H., a wilderness-medicine professional, and croo member Cooper D., trained as a wilderness first responder, along with the volunteering thru-hiker—over the summit to reach Jason swiftly.

At 5:50 P.M. Lucas got word that the Madison croo hasty team had begun working to resuscitate Jason using an automated external defibrillator and alternating cardiopulmonary resuscitation compressions. (All told, the hasty team would perform CPR for almost three hours.) On the phone with NHFG, the croo told Lucas the situation was dire. At a little after 7 P.M. the helicopter arrived at the base of the Mount Washington Auto Road. The cloud ceiling was around 4,000 feet; they would try to get to Jason's coordinates (44.32969N–71.27330W) near Madison's summit at 5,100 feet.

At 7:30 P.M., the pilot radioed that the wind and weather were too tough and that they could not get to Jason. Lucas reviewed Plan B with the flight crew. But the crew said that the winds were so strong that even with the Black Hawk helicopter at full power, they didn't feel they could drop the COs off on the higher ridges. Lucas shifted back to the foot-based effort.

Lucas's 7:50 P.M. call to Tasha H., who was coordinating the resuscitating efforts on Osgood Trail, let her know that the helicopter couldn't reach them. Tasha H. told Lucas that Jason had succumbed to the elements. NHFG's press release on August 14 pointed to extraordinary efforts of rescuers, both professional and volunteer, at the scene: "After multiple hours of CPR, AED deployment, and many other lifesaving efforts, [Jason] succumbed."

Recovery: As the temperature dropped and the winds howled on in the dark, rescuers set about bringing Jason's body to Madison Spring Hut, roughly a mile away. This effort stretched through the night, and by the time AVSAR's volunteers reached the hut, it was 4:10 A.M. and even in full winter gear, they were chilled and exhausted. Later that morning, ARNG's command sent a helicopter back to the scene and, with three trips to a landing zone near the hut, they brought Jason's body, his two friends, and the rescuers down to the valley.

Comment: Even in the previous outlined description, the weather announces itself. Only six hours passed between the three friends' departure from the Osgood tent platforms, where Jason was reported to have been well-rested, fit, and well-fed, to his collapse high on the side of Madison. Whether an underlying condition hastened his decline isn't known, but the hands of the weather and their effects on everyone involved are clear in these descriptions. Add to this Sgt. Lucas's inventory of the contents of Jason's pack where he pointed out, "All of [his] clothing was soaking wet," and that the clothing was largely cotton. Jason's soaked cotton clothing likely helped set the stage for a hypothermic decline once above treeline. A later report from the state medical examiner confirmed hypothermia as the cause of death.

The Osgood Trail is an exposed route once it breaks from the trees at around 4,200 feet. The west wind coursing over Mount Adams and then across Madison Gulf would have had little to slow it. Winds of the velocity reported that day mimic their cousin rushing water in their effects on a walker. Things we take for granted, for example, our foot landing where we aim it, become unpredictable. We end up lurching, colliding with the ground; we misstep; we fall. Not only would the 60-MPH winds (with higher gusts) stagger walkers, but they would also leach heat from a hiker's body, especially if it lacked insulating clothing. Hikers beginning to suffer from hypothermia would quickly decline in these conditions. Such a decline could also account for Jason's reported disorientation and insistence on going ahead when offered the chance to turn back. Hypothermia often muddles our thinking, just as it impairs our coordination.

A word of sympathy and respect for Jason's friends, especially Kasper, who first took on the load of both packs and then the hard physical and emotional work of CPR. What's more, a would-be rescuer's task also involves preventing cold injuries as they come on, which requires experience and know-how to recognize the weather's effects on a potential victim. Getting tested by mountain conditions early in one's hiking years is both a misfortune and something that mentoring may help hikers avoid. Finding such mentors is a vital part of what mountain and outdoor organizations offer. Supporting the mountain teachers who mentor us and the rescuers who come out to help us is one of the best ways of becoming a complete hiker.

That none of the three friends had the experience and know-how for early recognition of the weather's effects on Jason is part of the misfortune of this tragedy. And, of course, we turn again in thanks to the rescuers, who worked first to save Jason, and then through the night to retrieve him.

—SS, SB

Water Wary

On the cloudy, mild afternoon of August 15, 2023, a family from Lynn, Massachusetts, vacationing in Lincoln, New Hampshire, walked the 3.3 miles on Lincoln Woods Trail and Franconia Falls Trail to Franconia Falls for a swim. The father, Sean, jogged ahead, and as the rest of the family arrived, he was perched on a large rock in the stream. Their 10-year-old, Jonathan, went to test the water but slipped and fell in. The current in the pool prevented the boy from getting out, and his mother, Melissa, age 44, jumped in to help. She was swept downstream. Sean and the two older children, Riley and Alannah, then jumped in to help. Riley and Alannah were able to reach Jonathan and help him out, but Riley became stuck in some boulders. Meanwhile, Sean was looking for Melissa, who had vanished; he found her about 250 feet downstream and began CPR. He was then pulled away to rescue Riley from the water and boulders; returning to his wife, he tried to revive her and couldn't.

A bystander, who had heard shouts, ran to a place where he had cell phone reception and called 911, and state police in turn called NHFG. NHFG organized the recovery.

Comment: This is a sad, added chapter to Franconia Falls' history of drownings. Popular for their water slide, live water, and accessibility, the falls are a summer magnet. And, when the water is running high, as it was on the 15th, this stretch of river is volatile.



Franconia Brook below Franconia Falls, near where a mother trying to help her son was swept downstream. NEW HAMPSHIRE FISH AND GAME

The preceding week had been a wet one. Mount Washington's Observatory recorded rain on six out of seven days, totaling 6.42 inches. So it was no surprise that the river was running high, much higher than it would be during a dry August. The power of flowing water is easy to underestimate, especially when one's focus is on going in for a swim. Once Jonathan slipped and fell in, the rest of the family followed in attempts to help. One person in trouble became many.

A while ago, I asked Gene Daniell, the former editor of this column and, at that time, co-author of the AMC *White Mountain Guide*, to name the number one risk to hikers in the mountains. Gene didn't hesitate: "It's water," he said. "Water is powerful and unforgiving, and trouble in it happens quickly." Brook crossings are necessary and backcountry swimming is attractive; both ask for an abundance of caution.

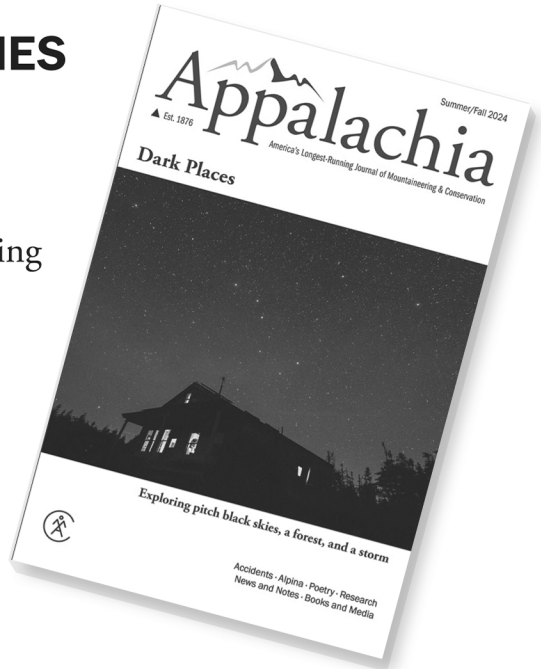
—SS

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