

Staying Found

As we climbed higher along the trailless tundra, the fog grew thicker. Most people would have turned back, but we were on our way out, through the fog. Fortunately, we had a map and compass. We would repeatedly point the compass in the right direction and then look hopefully for some kind of distinct landmark; an odd shaped rock, or the lone rock in a snowfield. Navigation was stressful, but within an hour we had met up with our descent ridge and were hiking briskly and happily out of the fog and down towards our car. Who knows what might have happened to us if we had headed out unprepared.

It is easy for anyone to be prepared before heading out on an outdoor adventure. And while it is rare that anything will go wrong, being prepared in case something does go wrong is the first step to staying found. Here are some things to consider before leaving your home base.

- Always tell someone where you are going and when you will be back
- Be realistic about some of the dangers possibly encountered such as stream crossings, faint trails, animals, difficult terrain, fog, snow, lightning storms
- Consider some things that could prevent returning on time or at all such as injury or getting lost
- Ask yourself if you are prepared for this before you even start.

Take along the 10 essentials. These items are light, compact and could save your life. Consider keeping them in your pack at all times. Also familiarize yourself with how to use all of these items.

- 1) Map and compass
- 2) Pocket knife or small multi-tool
- 3) Whistle
- 4) First aid kit
- 5) Headlamp or flashlight with extra batteries
- 6) Lighter and/or waterproof matches
- 7) 10ft or more of small strong cord
- 8) Rain coat or poncho and extra warm clothing or space blanket
- 9) Extra food and water (or chlorine tablets if you KNOW you can find water)
- 10) Sunglasses and sunscreen (especially in Colorado)

This may seem like a lot, but all of this can weigh less than 3 pounds.

Once you are prepared, here are some tips to help you stay found.

- 1) Hike in numbers when possible. In most situations, two heads are better than one and three are better than two. Dogs can even make good hiking partners.
- 2) Know your landmarks. Pay attention to your surroundings before and during your outing. The best landmarks are large and immovable objects such as rivers, mountains, lone trees and boulders, as well as unique looking boulder fields and groves of plants. Secondary landmarks such as your own footprints, a specific fallen tree, a lookout point, an animal den, or even just a divot on the

trail can also be helpful. Don't get tunnel vision: look all around, including BEHIND to observe landmarks.

- 3) Stay on designated routes. If it is snowing or the path is unclear, mark the trail using cairns (small piles of rocks that you remove on your way back).
- 4) Know how to use a compass and map and actively check them while hiking. Mark your progress as you travel along the map. Occasionally triangulate your position on the map. This makes it nearly impossible to get lost. It is also good practice with map and compass skills.
- 5) Know more than the 10 essentials. Learn how to tell time according to the sun and navigate by the stars without a compass. The most important mental skill in the backcountry is the ability to stay calm and focused.

Even the best navigators may momentarily be unsure of their location. The second you are unsure of where you are, you should STOP. STOP is an acronym for the following:

- Stop: DON'T PANIC! Don't take another step until you...
- Think: figure out what happened. To do this you might need to...
- Observe: landmarks, weather, physical condition of others, and time of day in order to...
- Plan: Make a plan to either stay put or retrace your steps based on your observations.

Every year people get lost because they just did not think it would happen to them. They overestimate their abilities. They don't bring the 10 essentials because they thought they wouldn't get lost. A lack of preparedness leads to unnecessary strife such as hypothermia, dehydration or getting even more lost. But following the above advice can have you hiking briskly and happily out of the fog and down towards your car.