

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

E.T. Phone Home

By Keith Hammer

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Fear should not keep us out of the woods and mountains, be it of bears or of a sprained ankle far from the car. With proper care and forethought, hiking in the woods can be safer than crossing the street downtown or driving the highway.

In spite of all the hype that goes along with the occasional bad encounter with wildlife, far more people are injured each year in automobile accidents. Once on the trail, injuries from wildlife encounters are outnumbered by injuries from falls.

Indeed, a misstep by a local woman while hiking in the Mission Mountains recently resulted in a broken leg that nearly turned fatal due to the length of time it took for her husband and Search and Rescue to determine where she was so they could come help her. Therein lies the key to minimizing our exposure to the elements should we be injured: always let someone know where you are going and what time you expect to return.

As a person that often hikes alone, I somewhat reluctantly pass along the advice that it is also safer to hike with a companion who can lend a hand in an emergency. But the same advice still applies regarding letting someone back home know where you are going. Your companion cannot render first aid and hike out for more help at the same time. Hiking in a group provides multiple sets of helping hands that can either get an injured person back to the trailhead or keep them comfortable while someone hikes out for more help.

Ultimately, it is a question of whether to hike alone when others are not able to go along, or to pass up a sunny day and hope a hike with friends can be scheduled soon. When choosing to go it alone, I do my best to take along a fully charged cell phone and to know from where it can and cannot reach service along my route.

I do my best to let someone back home know where I am going, when to expect a call that I have returned, and by when to phone Search and Rescue if I fail to show up. If I'm going somewhere off the beaten path, I try to leave my contact person with the names and numbers of folks that have been where I'm going so they can help in the event I don't return.

With all that said, and a lifetime of hiking, snowshoeing, and skiing in the backcountry, nobody has yet had to come looking for me or dial 911 on my behalf. I do seem to recall, however, getting a call or two from a worried contact person when I forgot to phone them once safely out of the woods. That, of course, is not a nice thing to do to your faithful home base! Remember: E.T. (Every Time) Phone Home!

While I have no personal experience with satellite-linked hand-held messenger services, I have read articles about them. Unlike cell phones that are useless when screened from cell towers by such things as mountains, these little gadgets link upwards to satellites and provide several options for getting help or letting folks know you are OK.

In an emergency they can transmit your GPS location to 911. In less dire emergencies, they can send a “HELP” text message to the folks you’ve pre-programmed to receive it. They can also send an “OK” message to those folks so they know not to worry about you.

Cellular and satellite technology, like bear pepper spray, can supplement but never replace common sense when it comes to safety. We can hike alone safely by thinking ahead, letting someone know where we are going, and by remaining alert for all wildlife. Or we can choose to hike in a group, which reduces the already slim chance of injury by wildlife and keeps the help of friends close at hand.

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Forest Service have excellent brochures on how to live, work, play and camp in the habitat of grizzlies and mountain lions. Indeed, the clean-camping skills learned from these brochures also better protect our camping gear from the gnawing teeth of “harmless” critters like mice, raccoon and porcupine.

The bottom line is to not let fear keep us out of the woods. A careful drive to the trailhead and we will have already survived the most dangerous part of the journey.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



We’re never too young to build confidence in our ability to play safe in the outdoors.
Keith Hammer photo.