

Notes on Wilderness Search & Rescue (WSAR)

by Walter Picket

Wilderness Search & Rescue has certain basic elements that affect all other aspects of WSAR . Learning these basic skills & keeping them in mind while you advance to the upper levels will speed your progression, & make it much safer. In the following paragraphs, I'm offer ten suggestions which has helped me learn & become a better SAR person.

First Tip: Exercise Good Judgment

Exercising good judgment isn't always easy. Sometimes you spend a tremendous amount of time & money just getting to get mission-ready not to mention the energy spent training. Good judgment not only comes from Training sessions with the team, but from reading books, & taking various courses. One important area for gaining good judgment & is usually ignored by novice SAR Personnel is just getting outdoors & going on a simple hike or climbs. The usually excuse for not doing this is, "I won't be able to respond if I'm out hiking". But think of it this way. When is the right time to learn where a State Park, LCRA Recreational area, or trailhead is located: During trainings & recreational hikes, or when the page comes down for a real emergency.

There's an old mountain saying that goes like this: "Good judgment comes from experience &, unfortunately, experience usually comes from poor judgment."

Second Tip: Learn From Those Who Know (or who have made those mistakes)

Finding an individual will help you bring to form your own "Good Judgment" without having to make all your own mistakes. Learning from other will also increase your progression rate considerably.

Third Tip: Equipment is Not Everything!

Equipment in today's world of modern advances, is still only as good as the people using it. Don't get caught up in the "equipment makes the SAR Tech" idea. Yes good equipment will make a difference, but your skills & understanding of SAR will make much more of a difference. Your goal should be maximum efficiency with a minimum of effort & equipment, & allowing for a reasonable safety margin. When purchasing equipment, take your time, ask others & see what works for them. If you can try their gear out, do so. Then make your purchase. Buy quality equipment the first time around. They don't come cheap, but it will end up paying you back many times over.

Fourth Tip: Find What Wilderness SAR is to You

The personal factor: What is It to you? To us, it is getting back to nature, gaining skills, self-reliance, comradeship, learning about yourself & the mountains, helping someone that is in a world of hurt. Some refer to it as gaining a Wilderness Citizenship. It's not a 'certification course'. A Wilderness Citizenship is something that has to be earned. It cannot be purchased for any amount of money. It is a process of expanding your horizons. Basically, a Wilderness Citizenship is gaining the skills, knowledge, & judgment required to safely travel into the wilderness day or night, winter or summer, good weather or bad & be at home.

Fifth Tip: Care For Your Body

There is at least one common denominator in mountaineering, that's the physical demands placed on your body. body maintenance is probably one of the most overlooked aspects of mountaineering.

Body maintenance entails everything from foot care, physical training, mental conditioning, personal hygiene & diet. A good physical conditioning program will make your outdoor trips safer & more enjoyable. while you are outdoors, you should drink 5 to 6 quarts of fluid a day. By doing this you will have the water to metabolize your food for energy; you have the fluid to excrete the chemicals that hinders & hurt your cells.

The right types of food can make quite a difference. A diet high in carbohydrates will help you perform better. They require less fluid for the body to use them & are usually well-tolerated by the body. Learn about ventilating the body & keeping warm. It is much harder to warm a body than to cool it. If you are going to be hiking hard, strip down to a minimum. The body seems to perform better when it is slightly cool, rather than when it is slightly warm. Learn to pace yourself. Hike at slightly slower pace, where you concentrate on conserving energy & making your body perform efficiently (breathing, staying cool, but not too cool). Relax every muscle except the ones you absolutely need to use. By mastering the "mountain pace" you can travel all day long & still have an energy reserve.

Quality boots that fit properly & have been broken in are essential. I prefer a two-sock combination with a soft, 20% nylon, 80% wool, tube sock next to the skin, & a heavy rag wool or wool/polypro blend as an outer. Make sure you have plenty of room to wiggle your toes. Too many socks will lead to cold feet due to lack of circulation. If you're going to be stopping for a while, take off your boots & air out your feet. If you develop a hot spot (that feeling you get just before you get a blister) stop & tape it with moleskin. If you continue, you will end up wishing you had not.

Sixth Tip: Be Prepared.

Learning emergency skills is your moral responsibility to your partner. Over the past years, I have had to use my medical skills a number of times. There is nothing worse than to sit helplessly by while your partner is injured or suffering from some sort of sickness & not know how to help. Part of obtaining your Wilderness citizenship is achieving at least an emergency medical technical level.

Seventh Tip: Anticipate Potential Problems

Learn to think about things in the "what if?" mode. There's a couple of things to consider here. (1) The risk factor. That is, what is the possibility of something going wrong? (2) The risk potential. That is, if something does go wrong, how bad will it be.

In an emergency, the adrenalin shoots through your veins & you may take chances you normally wouldn't. Basically put, safety comes from understanding hazards.

Eight Tip: Read Nature & Weather

Learn how to read the outdoors. Mother Nature has a story to tell for those of you who have learned to read it. Look around you. Why aren't there trees growing here, but they are trees on both sides of you? Look on the ground below you. Are there lots of broken up rocks? If so, this is an interesting story. Lenticular clouds are usually indicative of bad weather. There are many other things to read if one becomes skilled in the language of Nature. This skill of reading the outdoors is just one of many aspects of obtaining your wilderness citizenship.

Ninth Tip: Master The Technical Skills

While you're hanging out from a cliff is not the time to find out the bight of rope that passes through a figure 8 descender can catch the edge of the cliff & become a girth hitch. This used to be considered just an inconvenience, but there has been at least one death attributed to it. Before anyone does any technical rock climbing, other than in a well structured class, they should have a good understanding of equipment & knots. They should be able to rappel & safely ascend a rope. They should be able to make sound anchor placements, as well as properly belay someone else.

Tenth Tip: Be Self-Sufficient

Sounds kind of crazy, doesn't it! Isn't self-sufficiency a part of WSAR? Of course it is, but there seems to be more people heading outdoors with the idea that "if something goes wrong, the Park Service (or Search & Rescue) will rescue us!" By thinking this way, these people can justify (more like rationalize) leaving gear behind or push a route that maybe over their heads or more dangerous than they are ready for. but even with this logic there are several problems:

1) A storm may prevent them (SAR) from coming to your aid. 2) They may be involved with another rescue. 3) What if you are on a SAR mission & YOU need to be rescued! How would that feel to you if you needed SAR to save you? How would that reflect on the Team if it appears on the Evening News? Personally, I wouldn't go no more than 2 miles past the trailhead if I was not self-sufficient. When you go to outdoors, you should assume that there is no one else in the whole world who can help you. Make your decisions accordingly. Travel & climb accordingly.

In Conclusion

We have discussed some of the fundamentals that will make Wilderness Search & Rescue safer & more enjoyable. By no means, however, should this be taken for the last word. The learning process is a continual progression. I hope that your progress in WSAR will be as enjoyable & rewarding as it has been for me.

Walter's Rules of Search & Rescue

- 1) Push yourself; desire to move faster. Get your butt into the gym & push it!
- 2) Get in GOOD physical condition by training.
- 3) Learn about local weather conditions to avoid being pinned down by storms.
- 4) Always have equipment/gear packed & "mission-ready" by the door or in your vehicle.
- 5) Have your gear packed in large duffle bags, plastic containers, whatever so that you can transfer everything from one vehicle to another without forgetting anything.
- 6) Have at least a half tank of gas in your vehicle at all times, especially during the weekends.

- 7) Carry a portable scanner so you can find out what's going on with the mission as you respond. Remember, the more you know about the mission, the more you will know what you'll need.
- 8) Never, ever, take your pager into the field when you are on a mission or training. 9 times out of 10, you will lose it.
- 9) On an average, you are usually 2 to 4% below fully hydration level. Carry a two Qt. bottle & drink that while you are responding to a mission/training will guarantee a well hydrated level. Remember, if you have to go to the bathroom & the urine is clear, you are hydrated.
- 10) Eat & drink frequently to conserve energy. Rather than stopping & "brewing up" in cold weather, carry tea or soup in a vacuum bottle.
- 11) Carry light packs, Every mission is different. Learn from each mission. Remember: if you take bivouac equipment along, you will use it.
- 12) Arrange the pack so that the items you most likely will need in the course of a climb are easily available.
- 13) Avoid using complicated harnesses which require a tedious untying to remove or put on clothing.
- 14) Immediately after each & ever mission, restock & repack your equipment in your pack & vehicle before you go home.
- 15) Each and every mission is different. Keep your mind open & your ears alert. Use to opportunity to learn.