

Lifesaving Day Hike Needs

By Al Cornell

The day hike is one of the most deadly events that can happen in our forest. Yes, there have been deaths here from just going on what was supposed to be a simple day hike. Such deaths are almost always due to lack of proper preparation. Poor planning leaves the day hiker with few or no options--resulting in poor survival decisions.

When a day hiker is confronted by an unexpected and life threatening situation, the hiker must be able to cope in order to survive. There is no "second place" ribbon in survival. You either pass—live, or fail—die. Being prepared is not just an answer, it is the only answer. A hiker who fails to prepare is a hiker who is preparing to fail!

Have a survival mentality. Think "outdoor safety" before you think "I'm going for a hike." Survival starts at home as you prepare your day pack. Tell a reliable person to call 911 if you don't return as planned. Stick to your stated route so search teams can locate you quickly.

Know and obey the weather. You'll be in big trouble if a frontal passage changes the weather from "fair and dry" to "cold and wet." In many cases, the shift to severe weather is the main reason for a pleasant hike turning into a survival event. Watch the weather channel for a few minutes for several days before your hike. (This is one instance when you are a "boob" for not watching the "boob tube.")

Know your limitations. Hiking too far on any trail and starting too late in the day creates many survival situations here in red rock country. Do not overextend your hiking ability.

Carry essential items that you would need if the worst happened. Even stepping on a small stone can cause a fall and the potential that you won't be able to get up. Don't think "It won't happen to Me." Verde Search and Rescue volunteers find that most hikers who get in trouble don't have a way to start a fire, a flashlight, enough water, clothing for our cool nights, shelter, or a map and compass.

But many do have a cell phone. Take yours! Many hikers here would be dead today without being able to call 911. But cell phone batteries only last so long and won't work in all areas. Don't depend on it as your lifeline. It's just part of your day pack survival kit until you can be rescued. If you are very lucky, most rescues are achieved in 8-12 hours—a short time when one has survival items--but more than enough time to DIE without them.

Spend time once making your short term survival kit and then include it whenever you hike. Extra clothes like a wool cap, scarf and gloves don't take up much room. A balaclava—a hood that covers the entire head and neck—is a more efficient use of space.

Shelter can be a reusable space blanket to keep wind and rain from you and your clothing or can provide shade. Even a few large leaf bags will work—one for the top and the other for the

lower end of your body in the cold or rain. In heat, they provide shade. Fifty feet of nylon cord can rig a space blanket into a lean-to between two trees. A knife for cutting cord for the shelter and kindling is also a must.

Take two butane lighters for that all important FIRE. (use the kind where you can see how much butane is left) Fire serves as a signal day and night and provides warmth. Toilet paper makes great tinder for fire starting. Flashlights are seen by helicopters at night and those who have them in their day pack are found faster. Signal mirrors attract aviators in the day. If they can't help you, at least they will report the location of your signal. CD's make good mirrors. A map and compass that you know how to use are musts. A whistle carries farther than yelling and doesn't take as much energy. Three blasts means HELP.

Take more water than you think you will need. In our dry climate, you will need more water than in other parts of the country. A first aid kit in a plastic soap dish with bandages, gauze, tape, mole skin, tweezers, small scissors, anti-bacterial ointment, soap and aspirin will help with removing cactus spines and treating blisters, cuts and abrasions.

Yes, setting this up will take time and maybe a little money. Proper preparedness will not only serve as your safety net. It will expand your comfort zone and thus make your hike more enjoyable. If you lack an essential item when it's needed, you may never need it again.

Don't be that hiker. Stay Found!