

Get Wild: Do adults need to hug a tree?

Charles Pitman



An injured patient is wheeled out on the McCullough Gulch Trail in 2017 by a Summit County Rescue Group team.

Get Wild/Courtesy photo

A tree can be your friend! Several years ago, the on-call Summit County Rescue Group mission coordinator received a call from Summit County Dispatch regarding a person lost in the Mesa Cortina area. They were tired, out of food, on the wrong trail and very disoriented as to which way to hike back to the trailhead.

Since I live in Wildernest, the coordinator and I decided that he would not go to an all-call for team members to respond. Rather, I would put on my pack and hike a trail I knew quite well to the coordinates we were provided from dispatch. I was a fast hiker, even with a heavy pack, and this was expected to be a very easy rescue — hike in, snag the lost party and hike out — all in 40 minutes or so.

Except, it wasn't. I arrived at the coordinates and there was no one there. I called out and heard no response. I double-checked the accuracy of the coordinates and they were spot on. Now what? Did the party find their way out before we got going and not call to inform us? Yes, that happens.

The cell phone reception in the area was very spotty, but eventually the lost party was contacted again and asked to call 911 so we could obtain a second set of coordinates. The new coordinates were a fair distance away, and off I went. How hard could this be?

I arrived at the second set of coordinates and no lost party. I was now frustrated. I asked the mission coordinator to again contact the lost party. But now I requested dispatch to ask if the party had continued to walk. Yes, they had! The person was firmly told that there was someone trying to find them and they absolutely had to nail themselves to the trail and not to move.

Eventually, there they were, standing in the trail.

This was no time for a lecture. I understood. They were lost, scared, it was well after dark and they had no idea of where they were or what to do. Was help really coming? Minutes seem like hours when you are standing around and waiting with nothing more than your thoughts.

On occasion we talk to kids about the Hug a Tree program. The concept is that if you are separated from your hiking group, find a tree and stay there. Don't wander around.

In this instance, I knew that I was hiking much faster than the lost party and that I would eventually catch them. Speed and a good knowledge of the trail system were on my side. But what should have been an easy 40-minute mission on a single trail, turned into several hours on two trails.

Is this an uncommon situation? Not at all. When people are lost and they panic, they desperately want to find home. They keep walking in the hope that something will look familiar. Except in this case the hiker was heading farther and farther into the wilderness, and away from the trailhead.

Technology is on your side. The 911 Dispatch personnel are very often able to obtain coordinates from your phone. We know where you are. If you move, the equation changes and the puzzle gets a bit more challenging.

If you come across another hiker to help guide you out, please call 911 so that we don't needlessly respond. And adults can take a cue from what we tell the kids. If you are lost, hug a tree!



Charles Pitman

Charles Pitman joined the Summit County Rescue Group in 2004 and is one of 10 mission coordinators. The rescue group is a 501(c)3 nonprofit and responds to 200 calls a year for assistance. The all-volunteer team of 70 members never charges a fee for rescues and relies on donations and grants for annual operations.