

Get Wild: I've lost the trail. Now what?

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Get Wild



A Summit County Rescue Group volunteer is pictured on a snowmobile last winter.

Summit County Rescue Group/Courtesy photo

Being lost in the wilderness is a frightening experience, yet there are some easy and inexpensive ways to improve your situation and find your intended route.

In 2021, Summit County Rescue Group fielded a record number of calls for assistance. Of the 215 calls placed to Summit County's 911 call center, a large number were from people who had simply lost the trail.

Losing the trail at night is often the result of a hike taking longer than anticipated. Elevation alone can increase a hiker's fatigue. The four-hour hike may take six or eight hours. Your intended departure time wasn't really at 9 a.m. but rather at 1 p.m. Did you adjust your destination to account for the later start? Was the hike longer to see more scenery?



When night falls, trails will easily disappear unless you have a good headlamp. You might have a cellphone with a light, but if that phone has been on all day, is the battery nearly drained? The easy solution is to always have a headlamp with spare batteries. New LED lights are powerful, long lasting and inexpensive. They also free up your hands to grab onto handholds on tougher sections of a trail or to place in your pockets to keep warm. I have three headlamps in my pack: my main one, a backup and one to loan the lost hiker we have found.

Often, a hiker becomes lost by simply wandering off the trail — perhaps by following a “social trail” or a thin game trail that has disappeared — or to get a better view. Then they realize they have entirely lost the main hiking route.

During winter months, a trail that was quite obvious during an ascent might become completely obscured by a brief snowstorm or a significant wind event.

GPS phone apps, which are inexpensive and easy to use with some practice, will provide all the information you need. We often receive distress calls from a lost hiker or snowshoer, and along with that call, we are generally passed GPS coordinates that 911 dispatch automatically obtains from the phone. Sitting at a dining room table, we can plot the coordinates and tell the distressed hiker which way to travel to relocate the trail. We can also view the location in both the traditional map with the contour lines or a Google Earth view so we can direct someone around a major band of rock or boulder field and toward an easier hiking route.

Using GPS apps does not require mobile phone connectivity. You simply download the maps for the area in which you are hiking before you head out, and you can immediately hike with confidence! However, we do highly encourage hikers to place their phone in “airplane mode” to conserve battery life while in the backcountry. These apps can be used to find trails and hike all over the world.

So what is the best GPS app on the market? It’s the one you know how to use. Download one and play around with it while walking around the neighborhood. There are several to check out, including Backcountry Navigator, Motion X, Gaia GPS and CalTopo, among others.

Summit County Rescue Group is always available to help locate and bring out a lost hiker, 24 hours a day in all weather conditions. Being able to know your own position at all times and prevent that 911 call will give you a wonderful peace of mind.





“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Charles Pitman is a mission coordinator for Summit County Rescue Group, which he joined in 2004. The all-volunteer team of 70 members never charges a fee for rescues and relies on donations and grants for annual operations.

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