

Get Wild: Want a safe hike? Tie your shoelaces!

Charles Pitman



Quandary Peak is pictured in April 2023.

Charles Pitman/Courtesy photo

Recently the Summit County Rescue Group has been plagued by a new trend: [losing your shoes while hiking](#). How is that even possible? Many people seem to be creative on how they can get into a potentially serious situation. And I do mean serious.

What kind of trouble? Consider that you are hiking Quandary Peak, where this issue has been quite prevalent this spring. A multihour hike is in the forecast. So off you go, leaving the trailhead at, say, 9 a.m. with the temperature in the 30s. You notice that the hike is relatively easy, the trail is well packed as long as you don't wander off to the side.

You don't feel that you need snowshoes because of the trail condition, so you are what we call "boot packing," that is, wearing only footwear. You may have on boots, or you may be wearing simply low-top gym shoes. But you undertake your normal routine and don't lace them up tightly — easy on and easy off.

But as the sun rises higher in the sky, the temperature rises, and as you start your descent, the snow has become noticeably softer. Two things start to happen. First, the trail may start to become less noticeable, making it easier to depart from your intended route (especially if you forgot to download that GPS app to keep you on course).

Second, and more important, the snow starts to become very soft. At first you start to sink in an inch or two and your shoes start getting wet. The farther down the mountain you descend, the warmer the temperatures, the softer the snow and the deeper you sink. You may eventually be ankle, knee or even hip depth, especially if the trail has become illusive.

What we are seeing is that hikers sink so deep that they pull their foot out of a hole only to find their shoe, and possibly sock, have been sucked off one foot. Their feet may be so wet and cold that they don't immediately notice. If their shoe is 2 or 3 feet deep in the snow and they have no shovel, that shoe is likely lost.

Walking in wet snow with a bare foot can be limb threatening. Severe frostbite to the foot is a real potential. The sun may be out and the air may feel warm, but your foot is constantly standing on, or sinking in, wet ice. If you try holding on to a block of ice or snow, how long

can you stand it before the pain kicks in? Now consider doing that for one or two hours.

We had several calls for just this situation within a two-week period. All these hikers were very lucky. They still had cell phone reception and could call for help. But serious frostbite was already starting to take hold and some of these people were walked out well after dark. Hypothermia was also a significant consideration.

The solution is simply to tie your boots tightly. There is very little chance of a properly tied boot being yanked off your foot if it is 2 or 3 feet down in wet snow. Wear gaiters to keep your (hopefully) waterproof boots, lower legs and feet dry; take a spare change of socks.

Spring is a gorgeous time to hike. But sensible footwear and wearing it properly could save you major aggravation, and save our volunteer team the effort of, once again, retrieving a shoeless hiker.



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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.