

Get Wild: If you lose the trail, don't necessarily follow your nose

Charles Pitman



A January 2022 search for a missing hiker on Quandary Peak had support from both the Lifeguard 1 and Lifeguard 2 helicopters.

Courtesy photo

On March 10 I was notified of a hiker on Quandary Peak who had lost the trail. He was not acclimated in Summit County, a novice hiker, marginally equipped for a winter hike, this was his second 14er attempt (his first attempt, unsuccessful, was a different peak the previous day), and the weather was snowy and windy. He was from the Southern U.S. and started the hike at 6:30 a.m. Because of weather conditions and exhaustion, he turned around well short of the summit but lost the trail on his descent.

When people are lost above timberline, often the tendency is for them to follow the fall line (the most direct line going downhill) on the descent. On Quandary Peak, this strategy will lead the hiker way north of the trail. In the winter, they will end up in deep snow — cold, out of energy, mentally drained and likely starting to panic. In a worst case, they could end up in one of the steep and avalanche-prone couloirs.

Such was the situation on March 10. The man was very fortunate. When the panic set in he was just high enough on the mountain that he still had cell phone reception. A couple of hundred feet lower and that would not have been the case. When he dialed 911, dispatch was able to obtain coordinates from his phone, determining he was 200 feet north of the trail. As these incidents go, that was not a far distance, unless you are tired and in deep snow. I was able to talk him back to the trail and he was at his car nine hours after he started the hike, tired but very appreciative of the help.

Summit County Rescue Group responds to similar calls numerous times a year. Being off the trail by a quarter mile is not uncommon. This generally happens because the hiker followed the fall line down the mountain, unaware that the trail was more along the ridge line on skier's right. This can be avoided by paying attention on the ascent and by having a good GPS app on your phone. If you followed a rocky ridgeline on the ascent, and the descent finds you in knee-deep snow, you should consider retracing your steps until you regain the trail.

For many of these individuals, luck was a major component of their rescue. Slightly lower on the mountain and the cell phone option would have been lost. They were often hiking solo; no one knew where they were or what they were doing. Many had mentally given up.

Had our teams not found them, they would likely have not survived the night's brutal weather conditions.

Similar situations occur during the summer months. Both Quandary and Buffalo Mountain are notorious for game trails and it is not uncommon for hikers to mistake them for hiking trails. Doing so can lead you into very steep, rocky and dangerous couloirs. In the winter, they are avalanche prone, and in the summer months you may eventually become "cliffed out" — stuck in cliff bands and a position where you can neither go up nor down without considerable risk.

Summit County Rescue Group responds frequently to situations stemming from poor choices on mountain descents. Most have been successfully resolved, often by lengthy and sometimes very dangerous and technical rescues. On a rare occasion, the results have been tragic for the lost party.

Be aware of your route on the hike up, and don't look for shortcuts on the descent, even if you are tired.



Charles Pitman

Charles Pitman joined the [Summit County Rescue Group](#)

in 2004 and is one of 10

mission coordinators for the group. 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.