

Get Wild: Why do rescuers always harp on the 10 essentials

Anna DeBattiste



A warm campfire can play a role in preventing frostbite, and anything in the wilderness that's flammable in the summer is still there under the snow.

Getty Images/Courtesy photo

In January 2023, Routt County Search and Rescue spent 19 hours rescuing seven stranded snowmobilers who called for help after their machines got stuck. Deep snow, remote location and extreme temperatures made it one of the most physically difficult missions Routt County Search and Rescue had seen in many years, according to their president, and the rescue might not have been accomplished that night without the assistance of a local volunteer groomer from Routt Powder Riders.

Why would volunteer search and rescue members endure such a difficult response to help snowmobilers who were not lost, not injured, and merely had snowmobiles stuck in the snow? They did it because the subjects were not prepared to spend the night, and Routt County Search and Rescue feared some might not survive if they delayed the rescue until morning.

Backcountry search and rescue teams across Colorado since the '70s have strongly advised people to carry the 10 essentials. So have rescue teams in other states and countries. The concept of the 10 essentials has evolved over many years since first published by the Seattle Mountaineers in the mid-1970s. There is good reason for this. Experienced backcountry recreationists tailor their backpack contents to weather, elevation, experience and ability, the experience and ability of their companions, the number of folks in their party, and other factors. Nonetheless, the goal for rescue teams remains the same: the ten essentials are not intended to make your trip more enjoyable or for you to be more satisfied with your trip, but rather to help ensure you can survive when things go wrong.

Having said that, the 10 essentials might make your outing more enjoyable, too. Surely being cold, hungry, or thirsty can diminish the experience of enjoying the backcountry. But that isn't what backcountry search and rescue teams care about. We care that if something goes wrong, you can survive long enough to self-rescue or for us to reach and rescue you.

In Colorado, a rescue may be a long time coming. A team may take anywhere from 30 minutes to 30 hours or more to reach an injured party or find a lost party, depending on circumstances, distance, weather, elevation, and terrain. One of the most common statements we hear from rescue subjects is, "I was not prepared to wait as long as it took you to get here."

Are you thinking: "It will never happen to me?" Colorado sees an average of 2,800 backcountry rescue responses annually across the state. On top of that, the law of probability tells us there are plenty of folks who encounter mishaps in our mountains and manage to self-rescue, and those incidents are never recorded. The Colorado Fourteeners Initiative (CFI) reported hiker statistics for Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks in 2021 for the first time, and found that some of the more popular peaks in the Front Range and Tenmile Range saw 15,000 to 40,000 hikers each that year. These peaks may have 400–1,000 climbers on them in a single day, so there are going to be incidents, great and small. Hikers often come to each other's aid, knowing that a backcountry search and rescue team response could be eight to 10 hours away; the incidents we do respond to are typically those in which a subject is immobile and a litter extrication is needed.

The sheer volume of incidents means the real question is, how prepared are you to handle a mishap with what you carry in your pack? Can you help another member of your party self-rescue if something goes wrong? Do you have the gear to help prevent mishaps in the first place, such as clothing layers to prevent frostbite or hypothermia? And in a worst-case scenario, can you survive a night or two out? Carrying the 10 essentials is a good start. You might think of it as insurance. We buy insurance to manage risk, hoping we will never need it, but when something goes wrong, that insurance becomes our safety net.

Anna DeBattiste is a volunteer public information officer with the Colorado Search and Rescue Association and a former PIO with Summit County Rescue Group, both of which are 501(c)(3) nonprofits that rely on donations and grants for their operations. The Colorado Search and Rescue Association provides advocacy, resource coordination, member education and collaboration forums for backcountry search and rescue teams and other partners across the state.



Anna DeBattiste
Anna DeBattiste/Courtesy photo