

# Get Wild: When does search and rescue call for a helicopter?

Charles Pitman



## **A helicopter arrives on the scene of a rescue in 2008.**

*Summit County Rescue Group*

Becoming injured, lost, cold or tired while in the backcountry can leave a person very concerned and looking for help getting out of their predicament. Typically, the person in trouble wants an immediate resolution. In some cases a helicopter extraction is warranted, but that is a rarity.

The Summit County Rescue Group has a few options for air support. Primarily we use Flight for Life and, less often, the High-Altitude Army National Guard Aviation Training Site. The aircraft provided by both these organizations offer vastly different capabilities and the difference in aircraft size means different landing zone parameters. The rescue group's mission coordinator needs to understand the precise nature of the situation. Are we dealing with an injury, illness, lost person or missing person?

In general, helicopter operations are used for life and limb critical situations, although they may also be used in search operations or if there is a serious concern for rescuer safety.

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Helicopter operational variables include: the closest landing zone, the exact nature of the search and rescue operation, weather in the operational area, whether a helicopter on another run or out of commission for maintenance, how long would it take to extract the patient via ground operations and what is the risk to the patient, and how long will it take to obtain permission for an operation.

In general, Flight for Life approval is more expeditious than the National Guard. All discussions may include the mission coordinator, Summit County Sheriff's Office, Colorado Search and Rescue, Flight for Life operations, and the Army National Guard headquarters on both the East Coast and in the state. Approval can take anywhere from minutes to over an hour, and response times, likewise, will vary.

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Different aircraft have different capabilities. The High-Altitude Army National Guard Aviation Training Site can provide a hoist operation where

it does not need to land — although when it does land there are different considerations because of the size and power of something like a Blackhawk helicopter.

Can the lost, sick or injured party request these air assets? No. That determination is the responsibility of the mission coordinator and others, keeping in mind all of the above variables.

Summit County Rescue Group has had individuals demand a helicopter extraction. Yet, perhaps because the ceiling was low, it was raining, winds were high, there was lightning in the area or there was no landing zone anywhere close to the party, they did not get one. We have also had individuals say they have paid for a helicopter rescue by an insurance policy they have purchased. Therefore, we are obligated to obtain one.

If you have such an insurance card, you should determine the location of closest helicopter company, if their helicopter is suitable for high-altitude operations, how versed are they in high-altitude rescues, what are their altitude limitations, what are their requirements for a landing zone, what are their weight limitations and what are their weather limitations.

For Summit County Rescue Group operations, the decision is solely in the hands of search and rescue, sheriff's office and aircraft personnel. The patient, when injured, has the option of denying a helicopter for a medical extraction. Sometimes there is an insurance consideration. In that case, the rescue group will make the quickest and most efficient extraction possible via ground operations.

Helicopters are expensive and add another element of risk that should be minimized. These decisions are not taken lightly nor in a vacuum. There are a lot of considerations. But rest assured, whether a helicopter extraction is warranted or not, the Summit County Rescue Group will bring the patient out of the field as quickly and safely as possible, with the patient's health and well-being and rescuer safety in mind.



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Charles Pitman

**Charles Pitman joined the Summit County Rescue Group in 2004 and is one of 10 mission coordinators. The group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that 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**