

Get Wild: Lost or injured in the backcountry? Don't call Mom

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Get Wild



A Flight for Life helicopter participates in a rescue demonstration Jan. 10 at Loveland Ski Area. Flight for Life often aids Summit County Rescue Group during missions.
Liz Copan/For the Summit Daily News

These days, almost everyone carries a cellphone, including when hiking in the backcountry. It provides some feeling of security should you get into trouble.

But can you rely on that phone to summon help in an emergency? Possibly.

The phone needs two things: a cellphone tower and a reasonably charged battery. Hikers have a lot of control over one of these and some potential control over the other.

A mobile phone will constantly seek out a tower with which it can communicate. However, that searching comes with a price: using battery power. If there is no cell tower around, the phone battery can drain quickly.

The first words a mission coordinator often hears from a distraught person are, "I have to talk fast. I only have 2% battery left." You can easily control battery drain. Turn the phone off at the start of your hike or place it in airplane mode. A good GPS app will work with the phone in airplane mode. Try it on a short walk.



Cold weather is the death of batteries, so keep the device in an inside pocket next to your body where it stays warm.

But a phone with a well-charged battery still needs to communicate with a cell tower in order to make a call, a common problem in Summit County's backcountry. If you find you have no service, you can walk down a trail while frequently looking at your phone. With luck, you might suddenly see two to three bars of service. This may last for only a few yards, but if you are paying attention, it can be a life saver.

Another option is to walk to a higher elevation, if possible. This is especially effective on peaks such as Quandary. If you are in the woods, a cellphone connection is problematic to impossible. Walk up a couple of hundred vertical feet, and you might find two or three bars of service.

Texting uses far less battery power than talking. If you can't call 911 (the best option), try texting. You can also text with the mission coordinator. If you have very low battery power, place the phone in airplane mode and check texts only every 15 to 20 minutes, but make certain the mission coordinator understands what you will be doing.

When you call for help, you are supposedly in a desperate situation, whether lost or injured. The dispatcher is going to contact the on-call mission coordinator and will also obtain coordinates off your phone, if possible. The coordinates are generally relatively accurate – but not always.

Shortly after your call to dispatch, the mission coordinator will call you for critical information on location and injuries. That is impossible if you are on the phone talking with your mom. This is not an uncommon occurrence and very frustrating for the mission coordinator. Resist the urge to call anyone, except to perhaps text someone to notify them that you will be late returning home.

Finally, if you have no cell service with your carrier, most phones will allow a 911 call on any available carrier. It's worth a try.

With the above points in mind, it is easy to keep your phone battery well charged. In an emergency, it could be your lifeline to a rescue.





Charles Pitman

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Charles Pitman joined Summit County Rescue Group in 2004 and is one of 10 mission coordinators. 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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