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# Get Wild: Surviving lightning in the backcountry

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**Charles Pitman**  
Get Wild



The Summit County Rescue Group participates in rescue on Quandary Peak in 2008.

Charles Pitman/Get Wild

One thing that is predictable in Colorado's mountains is the unpredictability of the weather, and at no time is that more likely to occur than in the summer, often during the season of monsoon moisture. Rain and temperature drops can happen rapidly, leaving an unprepared hiker in a very precarious situation. Without the proper gear, rain can simply leave you wet and cold.

More problematic are lightning strikes. This is especially true on Colorado's mountains where a day hike often takes the hiking party well above tree line, leaving the hiker highly exposed. Hiking on a ridgeline is even worse.

What is the best strategy if lightning is an imminent concern? The obvious first answer is to not become exposed in the first place. Weather reports for specific areas are not perfect, but they are an excellent guide on what to watch for. The thing is, thunderstorms are often very localized. This is obvious in Summit County where it can be pouring rain on Quandary Peak and sunny in Breckenridge.

Thunderstorms often pop up in the afternoon. Let recent history be your guide. Have rain storms been the afternoon norm for the past few days? Departing on your four- or five-hour hike at 11 a.m. may not be a great plan.

It is not uncommon for hikers to start up Quandary Peak or Buffalo Mountain at noon, with little or no rain gear and clouds building — oblivious of a weather pattern that has been the norm for the past several days. In fact, it is not uncommon for hikers to start hiking with showers starting and thunder in the distance.

But what do you do if you are caught in a thunderstorm? Besides the obvious of getting below tree line as soon as possible, there are some steps you can take to minimize the potential for injury. Lightning is searching for "ground" and in doing so will look for the path of least resistance. That may be a lone tree, rock outcropping, metal (climbing hardware; power lines; wire fences), or, in a worst case, you. Therefore you want to make yourself low and insulated from the ground. The best option is probably to sit on your pack. If you have climbing hardware, drop it. Metal hiking poles should probably be dropped too. If you are on a ridgeline, you should try to get off it.

Thunderstorms are often short lived and spotty, but once one has passed, another one may be following not far behind. Therefore, take advantage of the lull between the storms and make haste to lower elevation.

If you are caught in a bad thunderstorm, don't expect search and rescue to immediately appear on scene to bring you down. First, because we are all volunteers, we are spread all over the county. It takes time to put out the call to members, pick up rescue vehicles at our facility, respond, get the gear we need and hike up to your location. In addition, as a mission coordinator I would be hesitant to send teams into the middle of an electrical storm. Minimizing risk to our team is of utmost importance. Finally, how would we get you down? By hiking you out. There is no magical extrication process. Helicopters are not going to fly directly into a high intensity thunderstorm.

In short, let recent weather history and the forecast be your guide. Such weather doesn't arise out of nowhere; you can see and hear it coming. Keep your head on a swivel and be aware.

Charles Pitman

*"Get Wild" publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Charles Pitman is a mission coordinator for Summit County Rescue Group, which he joined in 2004. 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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