

Keys to winter wilderness survival: STOP, think, don't panic

By Special to The Oregonian

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STEVE ROLLINS/Portland Mountain Rescue

Members of Portland Mountain Rescue train with a rescue litter during a snow storm on Mount Hood. Mountain Rescuers must carry all their climbing and survival gear, plus equipment to treat and evacuate a patient. Each carries gear suitable for protecting them for 24 hours in case they become injured or are otherwise unable to return to Search and Rescue base.

Wilderness Survival Classes

Tualatin Parks and Recreation offers a class for teenagers, "Snowshoeing and Winter Survival Skills," 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Jan. 30. \$40 for city residents, \$50 for others, includes transportation. 503-691-3082

Clackamas Community College offers "Survivor II: Wilderness," Feb. 5-7. \$187. 503-657-6958, ext. 2319

Lake Oswego Parks and Recreation offers "Snow Survival," classroom session Feb. 18 and overnight Feb. 20-21. \$303 for city residents; \$348 for others, includes transportation, equipment and food. 503-675-2549

Joe Whittington has a simple message for anyone who becomes stranded in the wilderness this winter: STOP. The acronym stands for: Slow down. Think clearly. Observe your surroundings. Plan each step carefully.

"I teach people to remember these four letters," said the mountaineer, who is founder and director of Oregon Peak Adventures. "Often, their adrenaline is pumping out of fear or frustration. So they need to get control of their breathing. Next, they want to think rationally and determine what it will take for rescuers to find them. And finally, they want to lay out a clear plan for survival."

"Of course," he added. "Maintaining the will to live is essential."

Each fall and winter, Whittington offers winter survival classes through Lake Oswego Parks and Recreation and Portland Community College in an effort to teach newcomers and experienced recreationalists how deal with the unexpected.

He is driven in part by the plights of people such as the James Kim and Mark Shaver families.

In December 2006, the Kims became stranded on a snowy logging road in the mountains west of Grants Pass with no emergency supplies in their car. When James Kim tried to walk out for help, he perished from hypothermia. His wife and two children stayed behind and were rescued.

Two weeks ago, Shaver and his seven children hunkered down for two days in their snow-stranded van near Breitenbush Lake. The Eagle Creek family survived by remaining calm while waiting for help, and using camping and emergency supplies they had brought along.

"With the weather so unpredictable in the mountains this time of year, you really need to go prepared, then use good judgment if something happens," Whittington said.

Ironically, technology is creating additional problems, said Steve Rollins, 13-year veteran with Portland Mountain Rescue, by giving a false sense of security.

"Because they have cell phones or GPS systems, some people are going into places and taking chances they wouldn't have years ago," said Rollins, who has participated in dozens of rescues of victims of snowstorms, avalanches and accidents. "They forget that even when their location is identified, it can take several hours to reach them."

During that time, he added, hypothermia can set in, followed by disorientation.

"When people are in a survival situation, they don't always act rationally," Rollins said. "A common reaction is to run in different directions or to climb up somewhere high to see where they are. But those are wasted minutes and can compound the situation."

Most survival-training experts urge travelers through the mountains to carry in their car or backpack what they call the 10 essentials: a first aid kit, flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries, nutritional bars, rain gear, pocket knife, waterproof matches, candles or fire starter, map, compass and a bright, lightweight tarp.

Rollins said he would make it a baker's dozen by adding a roll of colorful surveyor's or flagger's tape, a jumbo plastic garbage bag and foam pad.

"You can mark off large swaths of land with the tape to give rescuers clues to your location, the plastic bag can keep you dry and the pad preserves heat," he said.

Tom Laugle, who has been teaching wilderness survival classes at **Clackamas Community College** for the past six years, has one basic piece of advice: Keep your wits about you.

Assess your situation before doing anything, he said. "Regroup and get a sense of humor. It will clear your head so that you can think clearly."

He also suggests always traveling with a three-day supply of food and essentials, leaving an itinerary on the front seat of your car if you are a hiker and using your cell phone only for emergencies in the mountains.

"The cell phone can be one of your most valuable tools, if you don't let the battery run down, and you use it wisely," he added. "It's all about using psychology of self-rescue."

Winter travel tips

Outdoor experts offer this advice for people driving or hiking this winter.

Before driving into the mountains, check the weather. Tell others of your route and expected arrival time.

Take along the 10 essentials for emergency survival: a first aid kit, flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries, nutritional bars, rain gear, pocket knife, waterproof matches, candles or fire starter, map, compass and a bright, lightweight tarp.

Be smart. The mistakes people make stem from being poorly prepared, underestimating the risks and making poor judgments.

If the hazard level is high and snow is falling, be prepared to change your plans.

If you become stranded, remain calm, set out rescue signals and stay with the vehicle.

Keep in mind the rule of threes in severe weather. You cannot survive more than 3 minutes without air, 3 hours without shelter, 3 days without water, 3 weeks without food, 3 months without hope.

Joe Fitzgibbon

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