



# LOST IN SPACE

## Return from the backcountry in one piece by avoiding these mental mistakes. By Barbara Lee

**THE TRAIL WAS KNEE-DEEP** in snow and frighteningly narrow. The two backpackers moved cautiously, braced against a ferocious wind that threatened to blow them off the ledge a thousand feet or more. It was mid-October 2012, late in the season for backpacking in Glacier National Park. Conditions can be nasty that time of year along Pitamakan Pass Trail, especially on the high, exposed section near the Continental Divide. As the pair worked their way up the

trail, the footing became even more treacherous. One man fell and slid 100 feet down a steep slope, barely avoiding serious injury or worse. The two backpackers walked a parallel course for a short time, separated by the length of the fall, but concluded it was too dangerous to be apart. As conditions continued to deteriorate, and with the realization that they'd lost the trail altogether, both felt a rush of anxiety that intensified by the minute. They decided to descend the moun-

tain until they could find an easier route to the other side of the peak in front of them.

Not a soul knew they were in trouble. Two days passed, and when the men failed to catch their flights back home, one to Maryland, one to Virginia, relatives reported them missing. Dozens of rangers and volunteers joined the search but were hampered by driving snow and rain. One searcher later told a reporter that the wind blew so hard he thought it would knock him off the mountain. ►►

PAUL M. QUENEAU



**“WHERE AM I?”** Even when hiking in familiar terrain, hunters and others can become disoriented or even lost when fog, mist, or snow obscures the sun and visible landmarks. That’s why carrying an old-fashioned compass and checking it often is always a good idea when afield.

Each year dozens of hikers and backpackers are reported missing in Montana’s backcountry. Search-and-rescue teams recover almost all of them—grateful hunters or hikers who are cold and hungry but still alive. But some aren’t so lucky. This past May, the Carbon County sheriff’s office recovered the body of a 46-year-old man who apparently got lost in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. Experts say such tragedies can be avoided if people heading into the backcountry take a few precautions beforehand and, if they do become lost, follow simple—though challenging under stressful conditions—steps.

**Compounded problems**

Studies of human behavior show that people have a hard time responding to threats that develop slowly. That’s often the case for those who become lost in the backcountry. They get in trouble not because of one big problem but several smaller ones—forgetting to bring a raincoat or enough water, developing a blister or twisting an ankle that

*Writer Barbara Lee lives in Eugene, Oregon, and spends each fall caretaking cabins close to Gardiner, Montana.*

makes walking difficult, changing destination without alerting anyone, failing to check the weather forecast beforehand. As the day goes on, the problems compound.

That’s what happened to a family reported missing in southwestern Montana in

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June 2015. It was a warm, early summer day, and the group anticipated a hike with signs, rangers, and facilities. They weren’t equipped for Beaverhead County’s rugged Pioneer Mountains, but continued walking deeper into remote terrain even as they sensed they might not be on the right route. Any hiker who has missed a trail turnoff knows how hard it can be to turn back when you’ve worked hard to get where you are—even when it’s starting to become clear that you’re likely going the wrong way.

Family members soon discovered that cell phone coverage in the remote mountains was spotty. That prevented them from accessing online maps or calling for help. Unable to find their way back to the trailhead, they ended up spending two long days and nights in the woods before rescuers finally found them.

Rescue experts say that one error many people make is to rely on cell phones for navigation. Batteries can run out and cell coverage in much of Montana’s backcountry is dodgy or nonexistent. An old-fashioned map and compass always work. Large-format maps also make it easier to view the overall lay of the land, see how geographic features relate to each other, and find a route



**FOUND AND RESCUED** County search-and-rescue crews are trained to locate people lost and injured in the outdoors. You can make their job easier by carrying a cell phone—not to use for navigation, but so that rescuers can pinpoint your location via the device’s GPS.

back to safety. Learning these navigational skills takes practice, but it’s worth it.

That’s not to say a cell phone can’t have value in the backcountry. “Always bring it anyway and make sure it’s charged,” says Gallatin County sheriff’s office Lieutenant Jason Jarrett, the county’s search-and-rescue supervisor. “Even with no coverage, if you’re lost and turn it on or try to call 911, rescuers may be able to pinpoint your location. We’re seeing an explosion in the use of this kind of technology for search-and-rescue.”

**Stay put**

Probably the biggest mistake people who become completely disoriented make is to continue walking. According to the federal government’s “National Search and Rescue Manual,” it’s not uncommon for people who are lost to leave a spot, illogically head into even more rugged terrain, and make themselves much harder to find. “If you recognize you’re lost, particularly when night is approaching, stay put, stay safe, and build a fire for warmth and to signal rescuers,” says Sheriff Scott Hamilton, supervisor of Park County’s search-and-rescue program. “If you keep moving, rescuers will have to continually reassess

the perimeter of the search area, making them less effective at finding you.”

Unfortunately, the psychological stress of being lost, as well as a lack of gear to enable staying put, make it difficult for people to follow Hamilton’s guidelines and remain

**How not to get lost**

- ▶ Don’t rely on cell phones for navigation.
- ▶ Bring a map and compass and know how to use them.
- ▶ Know your limits.
- ▶ Know the terrain.
- ▶ Always go with a partner.
- ▶ Make sure you’ve told someone where you are going and when they should expect you to return.
- ▶ Don’t take risks that can put you into dangerous situations.



in one place. Consider the two hunters who lost their way during an October 2012 snowstorm in the Bridger Mountains. When the men were ten hours late returning to their homes, Gallatin County search-and-rescue workers began looking for them and wound up spending most of the night searching. Because the missing men weren’t equipped to make a fire or stay out overnight, they kept walking to keep warm. Rescuers, who early the next morning located the pair, cold and wet but uninjured, later said they would have found the hunters more quickly if the two had stayed in one place.

So they can remain stationary until rescuers arrive, Jarrett advises hunters, hikers, and backcountry skiers to always carry a basic survival kit. It should contain a cell phone, flashlight, whistle, first-aid supplies, extra clothes to keep warm and dry, waterproof matches and tinder, knife, extra food and water, tarp or space blanket, map, and compass.

Just as important, Jarrett says, is for people venturing outdoors to employ common sense. “Use it to avoid getting lost or into other potentially dangerous situations,” he says. “And always follow these three guidelines: Know your limits, know the terrain,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DENVER/RAW; RUSS RILEY; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK



and take a partner with you.”

Another tip, this one from Park County’s Hamilton: Make sure you tell a neighbor, friend, or family member beforehand where you’re going and when they should expect you to return. “I can’t emphasize enough how important it is for searchers to receive early notification of a missing person,” he says.

**Calm yourself**

Rescue experts recommend staying attuned to your and your companion’s state of mind. Perception of distance, time, direction, and difficulty can vary according to your mental state. Many factors affect the way we see things: wishful thinking, exhaustion, fear, lack of trust, the desire to appear confident and skilled. For many people who become lost, the primal fight-or-flight response to danger works against calm, logical thinking. Behavioral studies show that most people become agitated when they lose their way. Inability to handle that stress can turn a temporary inconvenience into a dangerous and even deadly episode. The backpackers who went missing off Glacier’s Pitamakan Pass Trail were able to contain their panic and stay put. That self-control likely saved their lives.

According to later accounts, the pair never found a route to the other side of the mountain. Instead, they remained in one place for



**SURVIVAL TOOLS** Above: A topo map can keep you on the right track. Right: If you do get lost, a space blanket and matches will help keep you warm until rescuers arrive.

four days, working to remain calm, organized, and positive. The men twice caught sight of a spotter plane, but, to their dismay, it appeared not to see them or their distress signals. They decided that if searchers didn’t locate them by the following day, they would try to find their way out. It was an all-or-nothing, high-stakes gamble, with elevated risk and low probability of success.

Researchers note that our perception of our own abilities and state of mind is much more subjective than we think. The lost backpackers had eaten almost nothing for days, had only a general idea of where to go, and their one topographical map was gone—blown out of their hands earlier by an extreme wind.

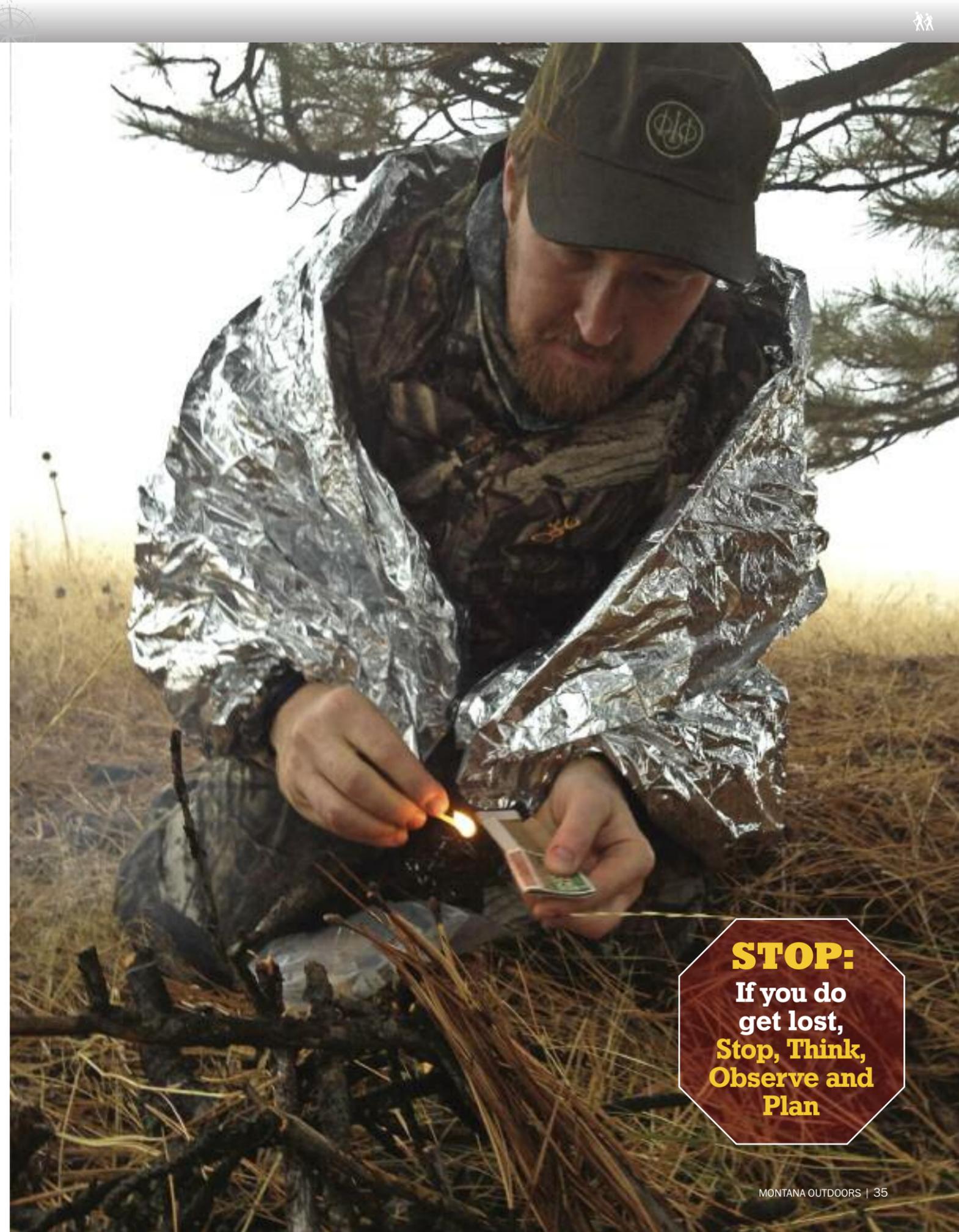
Fifteen minutes after the lost men agreed on their new, risky plan, they heard a voice in the distance. A rescuer arrived on foot, one of about 50 people who carried out the search in miserable weather and rough

topography. A helicopter soon followed, and the backpackers were flown to safety. It was the outcome everyone hoped for, and that many feared wouldn’t occur.

After the rescue, Glacier National Park’s chief ranger, Mark Foust, commended the two backpackers. “A standard recommendation for anyone who may be lost is to STOP—Stop, Think, Observe and Plan—and that is exactly what they did,” he said.

At moderate levels, stress hormones and anxiety help us by heightening focus and quickening response. But when stress turns to panic, those hormones become the enemy. Staying calm, clear, and positive—minimizing panic and maximizing your ability to make commonsense decisions—will keep you from getting lost and, if you do lose your way, allow you to survive. A clear head, cool demeanor, and common sense can turn what could have been a tragedy into an entertaining story to tell your friends. 🐾

LEFT TO RIGHT: SHUTTERSTOCK/DONALD M. JONES; PAUL N. QUENEAU



**STOP:**  
If you do get lost,  
Stop, Think,  
Observe and  
Plan

**Be prepared just in case**

Bring a cell phone so search-and-rescue crews can pinpoint your location via GPS. Carry a survival kit that includes a flashlight, whistle, first-aid supplies, extra clothes to keep warm and dry, waterproof matches and tinder, knife, extra food and water, tarp or space blanket, map, and compass.