

# SURVIVING SUMMER

## HOW TO PLAY SAFE THIS SEASON

by Susan Elizabeth Shepard



photo by Mary Cochenour

Last week, a Billings man was out on the Smith River in a drift boat with a friend for a late-spring float. This time of year — and especially this year — the Smith is running faster and higher than normal, and it's cold with spring snowmelt. When their boat hit a rock and capsized, he got stuck underneath it. His friend tried to save him, but in water that cold, with no protective gear, the body starts to struggle pretty quickly. The friend got out, but the man drowned: the first life claimed by Montana rivers in the 2018 summer recreating season. "Life vests were available but not in use," the *Great Falls Tribune* reported in a story about the accident.

Similar stories are sadly familiar this time of year: Someone died outdoors, and neglected to take a fairly basic security precaution that might have saved his or her life. It's understandable that people forgo the life jacket: The sheer odds of being seriously injured or killed in Montana while engaged in summer recreational activities are pretty low. There are usually fewer than 20 recreational and outdoor fatalities in the state annually, according to mortality records from the Centers for Disease Control.

But everything is relative. While the totals are low, Montana has one of the highest per capita drowning rates in the nation, and is one of the places you're most likely to be involved in an animal attack. Still, getting hurt or killed in a car accident on the way to recreate is much more likely, and maybe that's why a highway accident doesn't impress itself on the public consciousness the way that a fall off a cliff, a drowning in whitewater or a fatal bear mauling do. A car wreck is tragically mundane, not tragically unusual.

Stories about narrow escapes from, or death by, misadventure in nature exert a strong pull. Look at the prolific *Death* in series of books, about people meeting their ends in national parks: *Death in Glacier National Park*, *Death in Yellowstone*, *Death in Yosemite*, *Death in the Grand Canyon* and *Death in Big Bend*.

One of the masterworks of wilderness disaster literature is Missoula-based writer Peter Stark's *Last Breath*, about what happens leading up to the fatal moment in a number of adventure scenarios, including hyperthermia, drowning, falling, avalanche, malaria and dehydration. Rich with clinical details, each chapter deals with a specific calamity through composites of real incidents. Reading *Last Breath* feels like watching an elegant and educational snuff film. Its descriptions of how the body fights against and eventually succumbs to extreme circumstances are viscerally compelling.

The scenarios in *Last Breath* include



adventures on Nepal's Annapurna massif, in the Sahara desert and on China's Yangtze River, but no matter how exotic the setting, Mother Nature's basic toolkit remains the same. Gravity, water and temperature can go a long way toward turning a scramble down a streambank into a fatality. Most recreational deaths are just that mundane.

Others are obviously shocking, like a mountain biker's collision with a grizzly bear or a BASE jumper's failed landing.

There isn't a lot of exhilaration in complete safety. That's why we head out down rivers and up mountains in the first place, and a big part of why so many people decide they can forgo money to live here, or, if they already have a lot of money, make their part-time homes here. Not coincidentally, Montana is home to a significant population of people who know how to mitigate recreational risks and what to do when things go wrong. They want you to wear lifejackets, travel with friends and leave word about when you can be expected back. Because low odds don't matter when they come up for you. Read about some of the ways people have perished while recreating (see "No Good Way to Die," page 16) and you'll see, in retrospect, the decision points where some of these tragedies might have been avoided. And listen to some of the outdoors professionals below, who will give you the basics of staying safer without missing out on a moment of summer fun.

## FIRST AID

Aerie Backcountry Medicine teaches classes from introductory first aid to semester-long wilderness medicine training. Students are taken into scenarios where instructors will act out medical emergencies, just to add that in-situ stress.

"How do you manage that initial chaos when an accident happens? What we have found is that when people have a fundamental understanding of what to do with the basics, then they're able to act. They are able to do something that starts the process to help solve the problem," says Joe Blattner, Aerie's management director and a wilderness medicine instructor at the University of Montana. Even just a short first-aid class from the school of your choice will give you valuable skills.

Blattner says that in the summer, the most common traumatic injuries are musculoskeletal. "Rolled or sprained ankles, injured shoulders. Some of those components we see often because people are out there exerting themselves, carrying a lot of weight in a backpack, trying out new boots." Heat-related emergencies and dehydration are also common summertime issues. People

tend to underestimate how much water they need to take with them, or overestimate how frequently they'll come across drinking-water sources.

Also: "Make sure you're not traveling alone. Go with someone else — go with a group of people. That tends to help in case there is some type of injury or a minor fall or something major, so that information can be passed back to first responders," Blattner says. "Staying within one's skill set, and to stay within one's physical ability would be big factors that we look at when we talk about preventing accidents."

The most basic advice he'd pass along? Take a proper first aid kit and know how to use it. Look at the weather forecast and plan for unintended overstay: Take an extra layer, and extra food and water. There's no telling when a sprained ankle or worse could leave you outside the range of help for a while, and extra warmth or calories could increase your chances of staying whole until help comes along.

## SEARCH AND RESCUE

In his other hat, the one he wears as the chief of Missoula Search and Rescue, Blattner strongly encourages recreationists to leave word of their plans, anticipated time of return, where they're parking, their planned route, and what they're wearing and carrying with someone who can call for help if they're not back when expected.

"We're going to be looking for people that are wearing a certain color, whether that's ground searchers or air resources," Blattner says. "We're also wanting to know how prepared are people? Do they have food and water? Do they have clothing that might be able to keep them warm in case colder weather moves in?"

Missoula Search and Rescue is one of the county's two search and rescue forces, along with Seeley-Swan Search and Rescue. The 30-person all-volunteer Missoula crew is dispatched through the sheriff's office, and collaborates with area agencies to form a plan of action to find people who've been lost or stranded.

The earlier in the day they get called into action, Blattner says, the better.

"Once daylight is no longer available, that increases the urgency in either the lost individual, if they can call in themselves, or it increases the urgency with the reporting party, the reliable friend or family member who's calling in for them," Blattner says. "The fact that we are able to start to plan and organize and mobilize our resources in a little

bit of daylight is much better than operating in complete darkness. We absolutely can, we do often. I'd say a vast majority of what we do is at night in the dark. But the more daylight we have, the better it is."

Toward that end, Blattner emphasizes that cost of mobilizing Missoula Search and Rescue is zero to rescues. "People don't need to worry, 'How much is this going to cost?'" he says. "Call us."

Over the last year, Missoula search and rescue crews have been called out on 18 missions, says Missoula County Sheriff's Department Sergeant Jeremiah

Petersen. He says the fact that it's a free service surprises visitors from states and counties that bill for rescue services.

"In my experience, that's one of the first questions we get asked, 'Are we going to get a bill?'" Petersen says. Especially if they see a helicopter was involved. And if it was an air-ambulance service, then yes, they'll get a bill. But the Flathead-based Two Bear Air search copters are completely funded by private philanthropy.

There have been discussions about whether people should get billed, Petersen





says. "There's been talk at times. People make some pretty poor decisions and it puts people at risk," he says. "But the mentality here has always been we don't want people to delay calling for help [because] they believe they could be charged or be liable. Call 911 and get help."

None of which, of course, may apply if you negligently set a raging forest fire while you're lost.

Search and Rescue crews in the water always wear helmets and lifejackets, Blattner says, and he strongly urges recreationists to wear them as well. "Helmets and lifejackets save lives," he says. "One of the main reasons is not because people tend to get into problems or

emergencies in the middle of the river, but the slip-and-fall hazard right next to the river. A slip and fall there can certainly cause a head injury, and that head injury could temporarily knock someone out. And we're worried about someone's inability then to manage their own well-being, because now you're introducing a water problem into the situation."

And while you're strapping on the personal flotation device, maybe put down the beer.

"I do know that people like to enjoy a beer or a beverage while they're out on the water," Blattner says. "My recommendation would be, hold that until later, hold that until you're off the water. Con-

sumption of alcohol impairs people's ability to make sound decisions. It increases one's susceptibility to hypothermia and a whole host of things. We encourage people, whether they're on a raft or a tube, to enjoy their beverage after they're done recreating."

## HIKING

Mary Cochenour runs her backpacking-support business, Hiker Midnight, out of Helena. Cochenour, who is also an attorney, spent time working as a U.S. Forest Service backcountry ranger in Nevada's Desolation Wilderness. She writes in an email that "Lightning, early

season stream crossings, early season snow travel, and getting lost are some of the most common backpacking safety hazards."

If lightning is a possibility, she recommends that hikers tackle high passes early in the day before storm clouds roll in. Hikers caught in a storm should head for low ground, avoid tall trees, and if the storm is very close, get into the lightning position to stay as low to the ground as possible. "Lightning position is to sit or squat with only your feet touching the ground and your body curled up in a ball with your arms wrapped around your legs," she writes.

Cochenour recommends practicing

how to use a map and compass in a familiar place before trying to use those skills on a backpacking trip. Then, once out in the field, be careful in the early part of the season with water crossings and snowfields. Take extra care to make sure you're not about to drop through a snow bridge.

"When I was a ranger, more people were evacuated by helicopter after they post-holed through the snow and broke their leg," she writes.

Cochenour specializes in planning trips for women and says that women and men, of course, face the same environmental hazards. "Sketchy human encounters can be problematic for both genders as well, but this is a concern that

# No Good Way to Die

## The grim reaper wears many guises

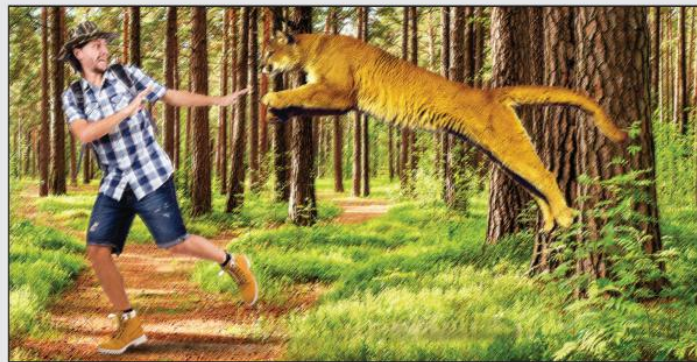
The National Park Service says that falling and drowning account for the vast majority of recreational fatalities in the parks, but those are two basic themes with a lot of variations. The variety of fatal recreational incidents in the region show that when it comes to survival, it's impossible to overstate the importance of simply paying attention. Here are some of the ways a pleasant day outdoors has turned deadly, by category.

### ANIMALS

**Cougar attack:** In mid-May, two young Seattleites were mountain biking near North Bend, Washington, when the men were attacked by a cougar. One of the men escaped to the nearby highway, and when officials returned to the attack site, the cougar had killed the other man and was standing over his body. It was the first fatal cougar attack in Washington state in 94 years. In Montana, it's been 29 years since the last fatal cougar attack, when a young boy was attacked and killed in his backyard. In 1998, a hiking child was attacked, and a camp counselor fought off the cougar. In 2007, a hunter outside of Kalispell was attacked by a cougar. Cougar conflicts are less common than bear conflicts in Montana, but the large cats have been spotted in town, most notably within sight of the Rattlesnake School.

**Bear attack:** Bear attacks loom large in the imagination, despite their relative rarity, because they're terrifying reminders of our true position on the food chain. And Montana state and national parks are second only to Alaska parks for number of fatal bear attacks since 1900, at 18. Montana's most

recent grizzly-attack fatality occurred when a mountain biker was killed by a grizzly bear after colliding with it in the summer of 2016. Far more common are bear-human interactions from which the human walks away, but the bear, if found, is euthanized. As bad as meetings between bears and



people can go for people, they overwhelmingly end worse for the bear.

Montana backpacking coach Mary Cochenour says, "Most folks who are just getting into backpacking are very concerned about animals, particularly grizzly bears and cougars." But not all threats have claws: "One animal that can be very dangerous that new backpackers don't often think about is moose. They are huge and can trample a person to death."

### WATER

**River running:** Montana rivers tend to claim the life of at least one river recreation-

ist a year, be it a rafter, kayaker or floater. There have already been drownings on the Smith River and on Rock Creek this year. The American Whitewater Association tracks river rafting and kayaking fatalities and their contributing factors, including the use (or not) of personal flotation devices and water

unbuckle your backpack's hip belt, use poles if you have them for balance, and look for the stream's widest point, where they tend to be shallower with a milder current. "Never tie into any kind of rope or wrap it around your hand as you cross," she says. "Ropes and strong currents can lead to disaster."

**Jumping into shallow water:** In 2016, a 26-year-old Browning man jumped from the top of Running Eagle Falls in Glacier Park and landed feet-first in the shallow pool below. An investigation determined his death to be accidental, ruling out foul play and suicide.

**Rolling a vehicle into water:** In mid-May, six men in a Suburban tumbled into the Selway River on their way to check bear bait while on a trip guided by a Darby outfitter. Two men escaped. The other four had not been found as of press time, though the vehicle was recovered a week after the incident. Backcountry roads like the one the men were driving on are often still snow-and-debris covered into early summer.

**Jumping off bridges:** A UM student drowned in the Clark Fork after jumping off the Madison Street bridge in 2012. His body was found in Alberton Gorge two months later. He had been swimming with a friend.

**Kayaking:** On Sunday, a Park County Search and Rescue volunteer of 20 years drowned while kayaking on Rock Creek near Red Lodge when he was trapped by a tree that had fallen across the water. Last July, another kayaker died in the same creek



is on women backpackers' minds," she writes. "It's always been my theory that the deeper you go into the wilderness, the safer you are. Sketchy people who want to do bad things to other people are usually too lazy to hike miles over mountain passes to do their bad acts."

Being aware of your surroundings, including other people, is the most important precaution to take, she says. "Are there friendly people around? If you get a bad vibe from someone, seek out the friendly people and ask to hike with them." And don't underestimate the importance of attitude. "Confidence, even when it's feigned, gives the appearance that you would fight the attacker off."

## SURVIVING THE GRIZ

In Bozeman, there's a self-defense class that isn't about fending off human attackers. It's the two-day "Surviving the Griz" class, taught at TACTICMT, a self-defense and firearms-instruction school founded in 2009 by former Navy Seal Chris Forrest. A couple of years ago, some area bowhunters came to TACTIC and requested a class tailored toward bear attacks, says Nick Costas, director of operations.

They could have taught the class without a live grizzly bear, but that isn't TACTIC's style. Forrest decided the class would be more effective with a live bear in the

curriculum, and went to Animals of Montana, a business that provides animals for television and film shoots (and that was found guilty of violating federal laws against trafficking in endangered species, had a trainer killed by a bear in an incident that was ruled an accidental death, and is currently appealing Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' 2015 filing to revoke its license).

"They have a grizzly bear that's about 850 pounds named Adam," Costas says. Students spend their first morning in class learning about bear behavior. "You're 5 feet from a bear and there's a little wire of a hot fence there, and it's pretty crazy to have that big an animal right in front of you," Costas says.

With the image of an actual grizzly fresh in their minds, students then practice using bear spray (though not on Adam). "We'll have them spray on an attack target that moves 21 feet in 1.5 seconds. It's supposed to simulate a bear attack," Costas says. Students figure out that deploying bear spray from a water-bottle pouch or even a hip holster might not go as smoothly as it needs to. "We do things under stress, and you find out [that] whatever you think was going to work, if it didn't work"

That something else can be a firearm, and handgun training is a large part of TACTIC's bear class. Costas says

one class graduate had an encounter that ended with the man shooting a grizzly bear, but ultimately each student needed to figure out how to respond based on his or her own values and circumstances.

"People ask, 'What if you're in a tent and you hear a bear?' It depends on your mindset and how you are as a person. There are the people that are gonna lay there and they're going to play dead. There are other people that are like, 'I'm very comfortable with my firearm and I'm going to get out of this tent.' It really depends on the skills you have and how comfortable you are." **fj**

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after getting knocked out on a rock when he capsized. Fallen logs can form deadly strainers that trap and submerge kayakers, and cold, fast water can make capsizing treacherous. Helmets and personal flotation devices help, but it's important to know how to avoid obstacles in the water.

## GRAVITY

**Falling while climbing:** Last summer, a Bozeman teenager fell 2,000 feet to his death while climbing in the Beartooth Mountains. Climbers have died in Hyalite and Blodgett canyons in the last five years, as well.

**Falling while hiking:** In mid-May, a Polson High School senior slipped and fell into a creek while hiking at Mud Lake and was swept over Mud Lake Falls. Many hiking falls are the result of slips on slick or loose ground.

**Falling into hot springs:** Two summers ago, a young man from Portland slipped and fell into the Norris Geyser Basin at Yellowstone after leaving the walkway that visitors are instructed to stay on. He was wearing flip-flops, which have been associated with other fatal slip-and-falls. "No significant human remains were left to recover," the *Billings Gazette* reported, a blunt statement of the horrifying dissolution that happens to a human body in the acidic, superhot geysers of Yellowstone. There have been 22 confirmed hot-spring deaths in Yellowstone during the park's history.

**Falling while drunk:** In 2015, a man slipped and fell off a cliff along the West Fork



of the Yaak River while climbing an unmaintained trail wearing sandals. The Lincoln County sheriff told the papers that alcohol appeared to be a factor. Some historians who have studied the early Montana territorial governor and Missoula bar namesake Thomas Meagher maintain that he fell off a steamboat and drowned in the Missouri River in 1967 because he was intoxicated.

**BASE jumping:** BASE jumping is prohibited in national parks, but that makes it all the more appealing for practitioners of this dangerous and adrenaline-filled pursuit. In 2014, an Idaho man who was living in Missoula at the time died during an apparent BASE-jumping attempt in Glacier National Park. His body was found near Mount Siyeh wearing a parachute that had opened.

## TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

**Electrocution while fishing:** In 2016, a man fishing Dry Fork Creek near Great Falls was electrocuted when his fishing rod touched a low-hanging power line. Rods made of carbon composites are extra-light

and flexible, but they are also excellent conductors of electricity. The danger of serious injury or death to sport fishermen is widespread enough to have been the subject of multiple academic studies, and fishermen are cautioned to mind low-hanging lines near streams and rivers.

**Photography:** National park staffers have blamed "doing it for the 'gram'" for an increase in reckless behavior by visitors, particularly in several cases when Yellowstone visitors taking bison selfies were attacked. Several years ago, the Forest Service found it necessary to issue a warning about the dangers of bear selfies. So far, though, the most dangerous photos have been those of scenery. Last year, an Idaho man died after falling into the Yaak River while taking photographs, and a Corvallis man fell to his death while taking photos next to Going-to-the-Sun-Road. He'd pulled over to get a picture of Haystack Creek, was wearing flip-flops, and lost his footing, falling into the creek and getting swept into a culvert and over a cliff. In 2014, a woman slipped and fell into Glacier's McDonald Creek while tak-

ing photographs and fell 30 feet down Lower McDonald Creek Falls, then died from her injuries a day later. There is a strong stigma attached to selfie-related deaths. Last May, a man died after falling off a cliff at Washington's Palouse Falls State Park while trying to take a selfie, according to Spokane-area news outlets. His family disputed the reports and demanded corrections.

## OTHER PEOPLE

**Murdered by spouse:** In 2013, Jordan Graham pushed her husband of eight days off a cliff in Glacier National Park, then told authorities she'd last seen him driving off with friends. Ultimately confessing, she said that she'd pushed Cody Johnson in the heat of an argument. Montana courts didn't accept that argument, and Graham is currently serving a 30-year sentence for second-degree murder.

**Shot by a friend after drunken mushroom hunt:** In July of 1992, authorities came across a station wagon in a ditch containing three men who had been out in the woods hunting mushrooms. The two men in front, in the driver's and passenger's seats, were dead from gunshots to the head. A third man, James Egelhoff, was in the back, screaming. He tried to plead that he had been incapacitated by extreme drunkenness. The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court after the Montana Supreme Court found Egelhoff's intoxication defense valid and overturned his district court conviction. The U.S. Supreme Court disagreed and upheld the district court's sentence 5-4. **fj**