Search calls surge with wilderness rookies



After running from law enforcement, the SAR team rescued two suspects who suffered from hypothermia. Photo/Provided

By Kathryn Reed

Inappropriate clothing and shoes, no plan for if things go wrong, and unrealistic expectations that a cell phone will reach help that is nearby.

This is increasingly what search and rescue teams with El Dorado County are finding. It's the result of more people in the woods and so many of them being unprepared. The movie "Wild" has helped perpetuate the idea that inexperienced hikers will survive.

This fall two women had to be rescued near Cascade Falls because they weren't prepared for the storm that came in even though forecasters had been talking about it for days. They

said they didn’t know about the pending storm and thought spandex leggings would be sufficient. They got disoriented and told rescuers they were going to die. They didn’t – thanks to volunteers who brought them back to safety.

That’s a routine call.

The number of calls El Dorado County search and rescue crews go on has doubled since 2010. In 2015, EDSO SAR was called 89 times. (That doesn’t mean they went out each time.) In the first 10 months of 2016, SAR has been called 130 times. Most of those people don’t live in the area.



Training is necessary to keep the team sharp. Photo/Provided

“People are coming to the area without physical fitness or the experience to recreate safely,” sheriff’s Deputy Greg Almos told *Lake Tahoe News.*

Almos runs the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Department SAR program. It’s made up about 30 volunteers in Tahoe; of those about a dozen are active on a regular basis.

Eagle Falls is where they go to the most; with twisted ankles a routine issue. Many people are less than a mile from the trailhead. Their lack of fitness contributes to the initial

injury and then not being able to make it out, Almos said. The altitude and weather are other contributing factors.

The veteran SAR leader is an advocate for getting people outdoors, but he also believes there needs to be responsibility and common sense. This means education before getting on the trail.



A hiker who suffered a foot injury this summer at Eagle Falls is carried to the trailhead. Photo/Provided

People go for day hikes without bringing another layer for when the temperatures in the mountains drop. They don't have packs with the essentials – like enough water, food, a flashlight, even a map. Nor do they have a plan in case they don't make it out.

"It's amazing how many people I talk to when I discuss a save your life plan over the phone and they cannot fathom why we

are not there. When I say it will take several hours to get there and that they need to make preparations to survive, and I tell them what to expect and say it could be four hours, I get arguments," Almos said. "After 20 minutes they call to say 'where are you?' I ask them how long it took to get to the top of Tallac. They say six hours. I've had people straight up say where is the helicopter. This isn't Uber. People have a hard time understanding that."

Then there are the times when people don't know where they are. It's getting harder to trace cell phone numbers because of privacy laws. Search warrants can sometimes be obtained after the fact. That is why dispatchers ask for consent to track people's phones.



The helicopter arrives to transport a lost person from Maggies Peak in February. Photo/Provided

A relatively new phenomenon searchers have been dealing with is "meet-up groups." These are Internet-based groups where random people meet for a certain activity. They aren't abiding by the basic protocols of hiking at the speed of the slowest person and making sure everyone returns to the trailhead.

“We are getting people who are leaving people out there. This is an epidemic I think we are going to see an awful lot more of,” Almos said.

Descriptions of what they were wearing or looked like are often vague.

Compounding the problem is friends and relatives back home who might call to report the person overdue often don’t know where the person was exactly going or with whom.

About a dozen of these calls are now happening annually.

Nothing is routine, and it’s not unusual for rescues to require technical skills – especially at Lover’s Leap and the cliff area at Vikingsholm. Climbers get stuck.

Their rescuers aren’t getting paid. Search team members provide their own gear.

It’s not unusual in the busy summer season to get back-to-back calls. Sometimes they are on a call for consecutive days. They receive training, but they all come to the “job” with a love for the outdoors and a desire to help others.

All of the volunteer search and rescue members are on-the-ground team. There is the management team that runs the command post and sets up the coordination, a Nordic team, snowmobile group, mountain rescue unit that handles extreme weather backcountry cases, and K-9 teams. The West Slope has an equestrian group and OHV.

And the people they rescue are not charged a dime.