

Happy Trails to You

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Peterborough Fire & Rescue

With every passing day on the slopes of Temple Mountain, I notice more grass and ground resurfacing from a long winter's respite. I'm just downright giddy about it too, because tucked away in the recesses of my mudroom and waiting to hit the ground running are my favorite springtime companions... my trusted pair of leather hiking boots. Stored inside lefty is a reliable compass and in righty, a toy whistle on loan from my son.

But that's hardly enough gear to insure a safe hike my first time out this season. The most important tool is good ol' fashion common sense. Even the most experienced hikers ask themselves the following questions before they hit the trails: Do I have proper clothing, equipment, food and water? Have I familiarized myself with the terrain either with the use of a map or the guidance of another experienced hiker? Have I checked the forecast? Have I estimated the length and duration of the course? Am I aware of the limitations of those in my hiking group?

Let's address each point individually. In addition to a compass and a whistle, a group of spring hikers will want to pack the following items: hats, extra socks, gloves or mittens, crampons, cell phone, space blanket, flashlight, pocket knife, matches, and first aid supplies like band-aids, a wound cleanser, instant cold pack and an ace bandage. Extreme you say? We've all read reports about stranded or injured hikers who've unexpectedly spent a night in harsh elements. Some were prepared, others were not. Which would you rather be?

As for clothing choice, while it may be warm at the base, ascending a mountain will bring temperature changes that may be a bit on the nippy side. Planning for the worst weather is the best preparation you can make. Always check the forecast before embarking on a course and prepare for the off chance of unpredicted weather. That being said, dressing in layers is the way to go but avoid cotton against the skin as once it gets wet, it cannot keep you warm or dry. Silk or polypropylene undergarments, polar fleece and a water/wind repellant shell should give you adequate protection during your spring hikes. As twisted ankles are the most common injury on mountain trails, hiking boots with plenty support at the ankles are highly recommended. Forgo the sandals!

Some climbers prefer to carry high-protein bars, nuts, and dried fruit in their back packs. While they are certain to have plenty of food, water is still the most important replenisher. It does add weight to a pack, but having more than you anticipate needing is always a good idea in the event you and your party are delayed on the trail. Reserve food and water for the descent since in these circumstances, leftovers could be a very good thing.

It's essential to inform someone where you and your party will be hiking and when you expect to return. Don't change plans or routes without notice. Dozens of hikers require rescue each year because they leave designated trails. If you lose your markings, hike back down to the last known trail marking. It's better to lose 15 to 20 minutes of hiking than to get lost and have to be rescued.

Each year, Peterborough Fire & Rescue in conjunction with New Hampshire Fish & Game personnel respond to numerous rescue calls involving injured hikers, whether they lay wounded on Mount Monadnock, Miller State Park or Temple Mountain trails. Unknown to most, it can involve up to 24 rescue personnel to safely accomplish a rescue. Wow! Why that many? After an injured party is securely strapped to a stokes basket, a crew of eighteen people will rotate six at a time to carry the patient down the trail. And depending on the type of injury, flashlights, a defibrillator, jump kits, oxygen and additional medical supplies are transported by the remaining rescuers. As you can imagine, nighttime rescues are especially treacherous.

Know your limits and the limitations of those in your group. Hiking is far more demanding than walking the same distance on level ground. Most importantly, never hike alone! It's not only unsafe but it also means that no one will be around to appreciate your fine, whistling rendition of "Happy Trails to You"... Until we meet again, safely enjoy your outdoor adventures in our wonderful Monadnock region.