

Surviving a Winter Whiteout on Mt. Adams

by Maureen Flanagan

When Wayne Rodrigues and Janis Doubleday set out on their day hike to the summit of Mt. Adams on a frosty January morning, they did not expect they would be spending most of the night hunkered down in a small cubbyhole way above treeline. Nor did they expect they would have to be rescued from severe weather conditions that sent temperatures down to 14 degrees below zero and winds gusting to 70 miles an hour. Rodrigues, a teacher of sports medicine at Springfield College and Wilderness EMT, says the experience gave him insights into the other side of the rescue operation and left both he and Doubleday highly appreciative of the team effort that carried out their mountain rescue.

Even though he is a veteran hiker, Wayne says this was his first time trekking above treeline in the White Mountains in winter. The trip was planned as a two-day, one-night hike up Lowe's Path to Grey Knob, a cabin maintained by the Randolph Mountain Club, and from there to the summit. At 5,774 feet, Mt. Adams is the second highest peak in the White Mountains after Mt. Washington.

As Wayne and Janis began their hike, everything proceeded as planned. The morning of their ascent when they left the cabin, the day was overcast, becoming windy and cold above treeline. It was "par for the course" for mountain weather in January, Wayne says. Because there had been no caretaker at the cabin that morning, they had been unable to get a weather forecast for the day. It was a short hike, though, and Wayne expected to be back to the cabin in three to four hours.

Shortly after leaving, the pair wandered into a winter landscape, with cairns covered with snow and ice. After a while, it started to snow and the wind picked up a bit, Wayne recalls. By the time they reached the summit, the snow was coming down hard and heavy. They curtailed their summit experience to five minutes, just long enough to warm up with some hot cocoa.

Heading back down, visibility was poor and "the landscape looked totally different." "Everything was plastered in snow," Wayne says. All they could see was whipping snow, not much else. Even Thunderstorm Junction, the main crossroads in the area where five trails come together, was lost in the whiteout.

"I knew we needed to stay on the trail," Wayne says. The pair worked in tandem to follow the snow-covered cairns. "Janis would stay at a cairn and I would search for the next one, then she would join me." They did this leapfrogging drill down the trail. It was effective, but time consuming.

They finally reached Thunderstorm Junction and scraped off snow and ice from the signpost to find what they thought was the way to Lowe's Path and Grey Knob. They couldn't be sure, though, as the sign was hard to read and could have been blown around by the wind. A while after they started their descent, the trail got very steep. "I realized it wasn't the trail we had

come up,” Wayne says. It was now 3:30 or 4:00 and getting dark. At that point, they were undecided about what to do—continue on or backtrack?

“I just knew we didn’t want to lose daylight and lose the opportunity to find shelter,” Wayne says. But they had already lost time and it was quickly getting dark.

After a while, Wayne realized they weren’t going to make it back to Grey Knob in the dark. He knew the time had come to call for help and took out his cell phone and called 911. He was connected to New Hampshire Fish and Game and then to one of the caretakers of the Randolph Mountain Club who headed the Search and Rescue team. “Don’t worry, just hunker down and we’ll come and get you,” he was told. Wayne gave some coordinates of their position as best he could, describing the terrain and the trail they had been following. He mentioned that they were on a blue-blazed trail. “That was huge – it ruled out a lot of other trails.”

With help on the way, Wayne and Janis focused on finding shelter and getting out of the wind. They found some big rocks just off the trail and dug out snow three to four feet deep around them, making a cubbyhole. After marking their location on the trail with a hiking pole and bandana, they went back to their cubbyhole, crawled in and lay on the one pad and sleeping bag they had brought along.

Though not the most comfortable accommodations, Wayne and Janis were out of the wind and cozy enough in the one sleeping bag. Lying one on top of the other, they ate quesadillas they had brought along, and kept hydrated by drinking water and hot cocoa, making several trips out of the sleeping bag and cubbyhole to go to the bathroom. “We kept busy,” Wayne says. Using up precious cell-phone battery power, they stayed in touch with Search and Rescue and Janis’ daughter, their contact person.

While they waited “I was a little nervous, a little anxious,” Wayne says, “but I wasn’t really scared.” “I knew we had enough supplies with us that we could probably tough it out... A lot of my background really prepared me for this situation,” he says. As a paramedic in the city of Springfield, Wayne has seen his share of emergency situations and is confident in his ability to stay calm and do what needs to be done. He is also a Wilderness EMT who has taught SOLO courses so he is trained in mountain rescue operations as well. In addition, he and Janis were well-equipped with the essentials -- food, water, a sleeping bag—plus winter weather gear such as chemical heat packs for hands and feet in addition to headlamps and a cell phone.

Wayne also felt fortunate Janis was with him. “Janis was amazing, didn’t panic, didn’t start yelling at me,” he says. He and Janis, a kindergarten teacher in Maine, had been together for only a few months. He was pleased with how much she helped out, he says, using good judgment to get them safe and warm. He adds that she was the one who insisted they quickly settle into their makeshift shelter instead of trying to find something better as he was inclined to do.

After a while, though, he did get nervous when his toes started to go numb and feel “crunchy,” an early sign of frostbite. He kicked himself that he was not wearing his winter mountaineering boots, which are rated for 20–40 degrees below zero. To prevent frostbite, he took off his three-

season boots and put chemical heat packs in his socks. Janis' body heat also helped to keep his feet warm.

Wayne says he was worried when Janis "got very quiet for a while." "I didn't know where she was in terms of her level of consciousness... It was important to check in with one another and stay alert and keep a positive attitude," he says. So they kept each other entertained. They sang songs like "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay", told jokes, and made more phone calls. "Anything to keep from falling asleep which would make it a lot easier to succumb to hypothermia," Wayne says. But the bitter cold temperatures dropping to double digits below zero and near hurricane force winds were beginning to take their toll. He remembers he started shivering and breathing fast. Knowing the dangers of severe cold, he was getting concerned about dehydration and the potential for hypothermia.

At one point, "I didn't think they were coming and we'd have to spend the night," he says. He knew they needed to prepare themselves mentally for a night on the mountain and he continued to stay positive. Not once did he think about the highly publicized case of the Mt. Hood hikers who had disappeared only several weeks before.

Just when they were resigned to toughing it out, Janis heard something outside their cubbyhole. Wayne says he popped his head out and saw headlamps in the dark. "Yahoo!! We were yelling and screaming. We were so excited," he says. It was between midnight and 1:00 a.m. and they had been there since nightfall. Wayne, though, says he had completely lost track of time. "I couldn't believe we had been there that long." In retrospect, he felt the wait went a lot faster than the hours indicated.

The rescue operation was very efficient and impressive, Wayne says. Six rescuers arrived representing three groups from different parts of the state – New Hampshire Fish and Game, Randolph Mountain Club and Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue. They had already put in a full night of work -- hiking in from the road to Grey Knob where they went through Wayne's and Janis' gear, talking to other hikers at the cabin, figuring out what their strategy was, and hiking up Adams in the middle of the night in deadly winter conditions and next to no visibility.

When they found Wayne and Janis, they went right to work. "They immediately put a tarp over us, which warmed us up right away." They also provided a thermos of hot jello and had a welcome supply of dry clothing including warm mittens with chemical heat packs, a fresh shell, a down parka and new hat. He says he knew they were in good hands and was very appreciative of their efforts. "They did everything right," he adds.

Still, it was dark, windy, cold, and still snowing. It took the group an hour and a half to hike back down to Grey Knob. "Even the rescue team had to struggle to stay on the trail," he adds. The entire group except for one person rested up at the cabin before hiking out the next day.

Though it wasn't the scenario he envisioned, Wayne says he feels good about the night on Mt. Adams. He and Janis were tested and together survived extremely harsh whiteout conditions. He has added confidence in his survival instincts and abilities to stay calm, make the right decisions and keep a positive attitude in the face of a potentially life-threatening situation.

Janis agrees that the experience was positive. She wrote Wayne in an e-mail from Ecuador where she is now studying to teach English as a Second Language: “In retrospect, I see this as a fortunate event only because we are both safe now.”

There are some things, though, Wayne would have done differently (see sidebar). The experience was a reminder that even the most seasoned, best-equipped hikers can be challenged by severe mountain weather. It also gave him a deep appreciation of the rescue teams who are ready to go out in the worst of winter conditions to find lost or stranded hikers.

Asked whether he will be planning another winter trip to the Whites anytime soon, he is quick to say yes. “There will be plenty more.” Perhaps not as challenging as the one he and Janis just survived, an adventure they will probably remember for quite a long time.

Wayne’s Winter Hiking Survival Tips:

1. Never forget to wear winter mountaineering boots
2. Always pack some form of shelter, such as a tarp or tent
3. Make sure everyone has his or her own pad and sleeping bag
4. Be prepared to spend the night and have all the necessary gear with you
5. Take along a good topo map (preferably marked with magnetic north lines so you can use your compass at trail markers)
6. Bring along a stove, pot, and hot water bottles for cold winter weather