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Get Wild: This fire trapped backpackers and hikers in the backcountry. Here's what we can learn from it.

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Get Wild



A firefighter watches the Buffalo Mountain Fire in June, 2018.

Summit Fire & EMS/Courtesy photo

In October 2020, a wildfire trapped hikers on the popular Ice Lakes Trail in the San Juan Mountains. Often found in guidebook lists of the best trails in Colorado, this trail is heavily trafficked in the summer and fall. It starts at an elevation of 9,840 feet and climbs about 2,000 feet to two turquoise alpine lakes: Ice Lake and Island Lake. The trailhead is located at the similarly popular South Mineral Campground.

In the late morning of October 19, San Juan County Undersheriff Steve Lorance received a call about a brush fire reported by hikers on the Ice Lakes trail. The area is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, but the San Juan County Sheriff's Office was the closest to the fire. Lorance responded with one of his deputies and found the fire to be already out of control.

"The brush fire had spread to trees at that point and completely cut off the trail," Lorance said. "We didn't know how many people were up there, and if the trail is cut off, you have to rock climb to get back down."

The fire surrounded some of the hikers in almost a U-shape at this point, and many satellite messaging device notifications were coming in from panicked hikers.

Lorance called for every aircraft he could request, including helicopters from Flight for Life Colorado and Careflight, and fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters from the Forest Service. He gave them coordinates for possible landing zones and asked them to fly over and see how many hikers were up there.

Ultimately, 28 hikers and three dogs were rescued that day.

“It’s amazing there were no injuries or fatalities,” Lorance said.

What did the hikers do right? A lot of things, he says.

They communicated with other hikers in the area and worked as a group. They followed directions from responders rather than trying to make their own way out. They were considerate about who got flown out first and didn’t rush the helicopters; in fact, they helped load them. Many had personal locator beacons or satellite communication devices, which was key because cell phone reception was spotty.

Here are some things for backcountry recreationists to think about.

Know before you go

When thinking about the possibility of a wildfire, your trip planning process should include continuously checking [InciWeb.NWCG.gov](https://www.inciweb.org/) and [AirNow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov/) for current fire and smoke activity right up until the day of your departure. Have a plan B in case wildfire is near or the area is affected by smoke from fires elsewhere.

You should also map out escape routes from your destination in case the worst happens. If the trail you’re on is cut off, where will you go?

Register for emergency alerts in the county you will be in. Check county and local fire agency websites to find the right local alert system for that area. While you’re at it, check the local fire restrictions, and keep checking local weather forecasts.

Once you’re out

Once at the trailhead, park like a firefighter. In other words, back into a parking spot and make sure you can pull out quickly if you need to. Sign the trail register if there is one.

If you decide to deviate from your original plan for any reason, especially which trailhead you’ll be parking at, be sure to let your emergency contact know.

Conserve your cell phone battery, and if you’re carrying a personal locator beacon or satellite communication device, make sure it is fully charged before you leave.

As you hike, bike, or climb, be alert, and look for signs of smoke or fire.

If you see smoke or fire

If you encounter signs of a wildfire, call for help immediately. Stay away from densely vegetated areas. Keep an eye on the direction of the smoke and note whether it is light or dark; dark smoke means the fire is burning more intensely. Dial 911 if you have cell phone reception, and if you don’t, we hope you have a satellite communications device to message your emergency contact and tell them to dial 911. Once in contact with emergency responders, follow all instructions, just like the Ice Lake hikers did. Your survival may depend on it.

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Anna DeBattiste is a volunteer public information officer (PIO) with the Colorado Search and Rescue Association and a former PIO with Summit County Rescue Group, both of which are 501(c)(3) nonprofits that rely on donations and grants for their operations. The Colorado Search and Rescue Association provides advocacy, resource coordination, member education and collaboration forums for backcountry search and rescue teams and other partners across the state.



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