

Get Wild: Backcountry safety during a hut trip

Staff



Kyle Griffin was joined by an experienced crew for a New Year's hut trip in the Summit County backcountry.
Carson Covell/Courtesy photo

I released my shoulders from the burdensome pack carrying 9 pounds of pork and four bottles of wine, determined that none of it would be making the return trip, and pushed in the heavy pine door of Janet's Cabin. Janet's, as it is commonly known, sits in the Guller Creek drainage southwest of Copper Mountain near the border of Summit and Eagle counties. My wife, Kristen, and I were hut trip first-timers and lucky guests of a fellow member of the Summit County Rescue Group (SCRG) for the New Year's holiday.

Joining us was a crew that does not simply enjoy the snow, but live in it and rely on it for a living, including a Colorado Avalanche Information Center forecaster, a ski patrol supervisor, an American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education course instructor, several medical professionals at the local hospital, new search and rescue teammates, and others who had skied or split-boarded the world over. Throughout the weekend we shared fundamental safety practices with one another that can be applied to any tour.

The next morning after breakfast, we organically split into smaller touring groups and set out to explore the terrain. My wife and I paired with my sister and brother-in-law, also Summit County locals, and designated a team leader, navigator, photographer, and a communications manager that maintained radio contact with the hut in case of emergency.

Fundamental: Clearly designating roles prior to your tour can help ease the burden of managing travel decisions and tasks. Designate leadership, navigation, communications, or even a snack czar, so each member of the team is focused on seeing the day through a particular lens and communicating their role back to the group.

Together, we broke trail south to Serle Pass, a granite notch folded between ridge lines of vibrant Arkose siltstone. After admiring the views, we continued west across northern aspects, talking through our travel plan as we crossed small pockets of steep terrain. After a scrumptious lunch on a sunny terrain bench, we elected to approach the bowl's ridge from the north, noting several rocks and grassy patches in the skin track. This descent would require careful navigation to avoid the worst of the talus beneath. Enjoying smooth turns, we descended methodically back into the basin.

Fundamental: We often read the avalanche forecast and make judgments about what is skiable based upon aspects and elevations that pose avalanche hazards. But where the snow is thin, don't forget about the sharks lurking just below the surface. Rocks, stumps, logs, willows and grassy knolls obscured by a few inches of snow can send you tumbling before you even know what happened. Spend time thinking about where the wind has carried the snow and ski conservatively in a shallower snowpack.

Next, we discussed several route options and our planning finally coalesced around an interest in building our mental map of the terrain to the northeast. This was part exploration, part preparation, knowing the area could be the site of a future search and rescue mission.

Fundamental: Don't get sucked into the mindset that Plan B must be a lesser alternative to Plan A. Try to make Plan B just as good as Plan A when organizing your travel, providing an option that you wouldn't feel let down by.

We contoured across mouse, rabbit and fox tracks near treeline, as topographical features began to appear with greater clarity. We paused on a knoll overlooking the scene where Kristen shared her apprehension about the terrain. Someone on the team uttered wise words: “My goals do not trump anyone’s comfort.” This instantly broke the tension. We crafted a flexible plan to reach the next ridgeline and carried it out with much discussion along the way, setting the skin track to avoid micro-features of steep terrain.

Fundamental: It’s important to go out with partners that respect your boundaries, and it’s also necessary to speak up when you feel uncomfortable. Understanding teammate’s skills and limitations, along with having honest and humble discussions, often leads to better outcomes.

That evening, after a golden sunset, we shared the pork and wine with our friends in a delicious New Year’s supper. Many of us called the ball drop in New York “good enough” and headed to bed before the stroke of midnight.

After breakfast the next morning, Kristen and I saddled our packs filled with garbage for the descent back to civilization. A hut experience steeped in friendship, forests and firelight had come to an end with everyone safe and sound.

Kyle Griffin is a volunteer member of the Summit County Rescue Group, which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that relies on donations and grants for its operations and never charges a fee for search and rescue. When he isn’t on a mission, he splits his time as a public servant with the Town of Breckenridge and as an outdoor educator with Colorado Mountain College.