Lost & Found

How To Avoid Getting Lost Outdoors

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Do you fear getting lost, or can you wander outdoors, unsure of exactly where you are, but confident you will find the way to your destination eventually? In this article I share some of the current thinking from academics and outdoor adventurers on why people get lost and how rescuers find lost people or 'missing persons' in different environments.

Coastguard helicopter approaching Snowdon (N Wales), image courtesy of Maritime and Coastguard Agency

In 2023, the Mountain Rescue for England and Wales had 3462 call-outs, with 21% of recorded incidents being missing person related!

As highlighted in Mountain Rescue England and Wales 2024 Annual Review, contributing factors include:

- poor decision-making/human error;
- inexperience of pursuit/unfamiliarity;
- weather (rain/wind/snow/heat); tired, fatigued, or unfit;
- poor visibility;
- inadequate equipment;
- icy conditions underfoot; inadequate footwear;
- inadequate communication;
- and equipment failure.

The Ramblers found that 21% of people between 18 and 54 cited concerns about getting lost as a reason why they didn't go out walking. Also, 27% of Brits claim they've never been taught how to read a map, and even those who have say they still don't know how to read one. [GetOutside. ordinancesurvey.co.uk]

In the US many calls come into SAR saying *"I have to talk fast because I only have 5% of battery life left"* according to a spokesman from the Summit County Rescue Group (Colorado, US).

National parks encompass vast areas where cell coverage signals can be poor or non-existent, posing challenges for even the most skilled navigators who may find themselves temporarily lost or overdue. It is important to remember that one should never adopt the mindset "nothing is going to happen to me," as there are countless reasons why individuals can become disoriented. Additionally, changing weather conditions, such as fog, heavy snow, and whiteouts, can severely reduce visibility, while strong winds combined with, rain can hinder the use of maps and digital devices, ultimately leading to increased fatigue and disorientation.

Image courtesy of Maritime & Coastguard Agency

iStock (Mariia Skovpen)

Preventative Strategies:

- Leave your plans with someone you trust, including when they should contact SAR. One strategy is using
- The Clive Campaign Route Card from mountaineering.scot and place in your car.
- RapidSOS.com & SARIoc & InReach (Garmin) Note: Overreliance on technology was posited as the reason of getting lost...they can also fail in cold temperatures, so bring extra batteries and keep them warm.
- Put your phone in "airplane mode" because it saves a lot of battery power. Texts uses less energy.
- Bring a map and compass, and learn how to use them.
- Many victims have no spare food or water and going through snow is exhausting which all leads to bad decisions.

Recovery Strategies:

- S.T.O.P. (Stop what you are doing, Think and consider the situation, Observe and take note of what is happening, create a Plan to address the situation).
- Backtracking, especially on a path, and heading to where you started getting lost. In snow just follow your tracks.
- At night and you hear a helicopter, just light up your phone and they'll see you with their Night Vision Goggles.
- Sometimes going to higher ground can help if the weather is clear enough.
- Spoking/Wheel/Rays (used only in a wooded area) is a tried and tested scouting practice:

Secure a paracord to your rucksack or a makeshift tripod made from branches, or put your flag on a branch/trunk and head off on a compass bearing and proceed out for one minute in all four cardinal points, making a mental map. Another version is by using an orange waypoint marker that you can put on a branch/trunk and go walking around keeping the signal flag in sight at all times (I use an orange signal flag by coalcrackerbushcraft.com).

For further information: Waylosing and wayfinding in the outdoors. *Journal of Navigation (RIN),* 2024 by Ole Edward Wattne & Frode Volden

Ways to Call for Help and/or assist SAR: (in an emergency dial 999 ask for police then mountain rescue)

Whistles can be effective for signaling if other hikers or rescue teams are within 200 meters. Blow the whistle three times to indicate distress, then pause for a response and repeat if needed. Sound travels better over water compared to land. Keep in mind that various factors influence how sound carries, including the whistle's volume; warm air allows sound to move faster, while cold air helps it reach farther. Wind and thick forests can also affect sound propagation, and the intensity diminishes the farther away it gets.

A signal mirror can be visible from up to 20 miles (30 km) for surface-to-air communication and 6-10 miles (10-15 km) for ground visibility. The range of a strobe light is about 2 miles. Light sticks are noticeable at night if you spin them like a buzzsaw on a string.

The following people reviewed this article. They offer you further reading and watching of the topic of getting lost:

Robert J. Koester, PhD, author of *Lost Person Behaviour;* https://www.d4h.com/blog/dr-robert-koesters-lost-person-behavior-and-how-to-contribute-to-isrid

Ole Wattne, Dept. of Design, NTNU, Norway. **RIN talk** called *"Outdoor waylosing and navigation in Norway"* can be watched here: https://youtube/3MdZAy95ojk?feature=shared

Dr. Colette Jeffrey is Chair of RIN's Outdoor Adventure Navigation Group. Her RIN talk called *"Why People Get Lost"* can be watched here: https://youtu.be/kL7Wm5LGB0M?feature=shared

iStock (Kerkez)