FEARLESS OR RECKLESS?

Mountain Rescue receive over 3000 call-outs in the UK each year, with volunteers giving up more than 100,000 hours of their time to help people in the hills. But could those statistics, and mountain accidents in general, be reduced if we all understood the risks a little better?

WORDS **ANDY WASLEY**

In April I attempted to walk Scotland's 200-mile Cape Wrath Trail, which has a deservedly tough reputation, with many walkers failing in their first attempt. I didn't expect to be one of them – least of all just four days in, and because I made an entirely avoidable mistake.

Feeling buoyed and confident, having bagged a full day's walk through the wilds of Knoydart by lunchtime, I felt capable of continuing my hike to Shiel Bridge to bank a rest day, however long it might take. With hindsight, this was an embarrassingly reckless decision, seriously underestimating the terrain and my own fatigue.

As my legs grew more tired I found myself paradoxically more determined to push on. Physically and mentally shattered, I stumbled on snow, wrenched my left knee and ended any chance of completing the trail. I made my way down from the hill to safety, but remain haunted by four sobering facts: my injury could have been far worse; I had no mobile signal; no-one was around to hear a distress call on my whistle; and if I'd only listened to common sense, I'd have left that short, final, exhausting climb for the following day.

Many **Trail** readers might have found themselves in a similarly 'tight spot' at some point. Sometimes, these near misses become thrilling anecdotes to be shared over a pint. Other times, they're much more serious, and forever change your outlook on risk and safety. Exhaustion and poor weather can turn even an easy walk into a close encounter with disaster, and even the most experienced mountaineers can suffer catastrophic lapses in judgment.

Before planning a second attempt on the Cape Wrath Trail, I wanted to explore how walkers and mountaineers can anticipate and mitigate risks, so I spoke to four experts about their views on risk and safety. ›

A nervy walker (we know he was nervous, because he's our editor) being short-roped by a guide on a particularly exposed section of Skye's notorious Cuillin Ridge.

STEVE ASHWORTH

Claire Maxted

Hillwalker, runner & mountaineer

Claire is the former editor of **Trail Running** magazine, and founder of Wild Ginger Running.

Until Friday 2 February 2018 I was a confident mountaineer, happy scrambling about over precipitous drops. That's why I never expected to find myself clinging, petrified, to Ben Nevis's snow-bound Tower Ridge. It's one of Scotland's longest and finest climbs: an 800m, exposed Grade 3 scramble with crux climbing moves of IV, depending on snow conditions. And it saves the most terrifying moves until the end.

As my more experienced climbing partner and I climbed higher, I grew uncharacteristically more frightened as the drops became more foreboding. As we approached the Great Tower, I was climbing sideways along the Eastern Traverse with a lot of slack rope; a slip would have meant a big drop and a swing into thin air, before slamming back into the cliff.

I could feel panic rising. I told my partner how scared I was, and he did his best to reassure me. I edged towards the corner, but was still attached to a sling around a rock. I'd have had to climb back up to unclip myself, then climb down again without its protection. Suddenly I was frozen, convinced any further movement would result in a catastrophic fall.

My partner considered abseiling, but he would have had to use his ice axes as an anchor, and he couldn't afford to lose them while dealing with a liability like me. He made the decision to call Mountain Rescue. Within an hour, the Fort William Coastguard helicopter was above us and we were expertly winched to safety.

Tower Ridge is a cracking climb, but I shouldn't have been there with my skill level. Unfortunately, you sometimes don't know your own limits until you come a cropper. I was very lucky.

MAKE THE CALL

If you need to call out Mountain Rescue, raise the alarm by phoning the police on 999. Be prepared to give your precise location and details of any casualties.

Descending into Tower Gap, an infamous danger spot on the north face of Ben Nevis.

Øyvind Salvesen

Nordic mountaineering guide and lecturer

Øyvind is based in Norway, and delivers training in avalanche awareness, climbing and mountaineering. He's also co-written a paper about risk-taking among rock climbers.

Risky behaviour is valued in our society in lots of ways – including within the climbing community. Every mountaineer has different risks they're willing to take, and what kind of risk they value when they look at other people. Our research found that risk has a credibility value in the climbing community – but it has to be the right kind of risk, with the right skill level to do it.

I think younger people are more likely to be motivated by 'credibility' to do risky things. If you're older and you've climbed a lot, you're likely to be confident in yourself and won't feel bad about turning back.

Everyone should examine their motivations before doing anything. Take a step back and look at what you hope to achieve. This can be a risk-reducing thought process. In my guiding society in Norway we have this as part of the planning stage. We'll meet with our guests the night before doing anything, and have a chat about why we're doing this – what's the motivation? A really transparent discussion makes the work day rather easier.

As with every mountain activity, planning and communication is key. If you're doubting conditions, these emotions can often be suppressed. Communication is key to keeping safe when you're out there.

Kevin Mitchell

Vice Chairman, Scottish Mountain Rescue

Kevin is the former leader and a current member of Ochils Mountain Rescue.

The biggest risk I see in the mountains is bad navigation. People can be too reliant on GPS or phone apps. These are parts of a toolkit, but the main part of that toolkit is being able to use a paper map and compass. There's no substitute for it.

Mountaineers should be able to navigate in poor weather and the dark, but I don't think these skills are practised often enough. At a bare minimum you should know how many steps you take to cover 100m, how to use a watch to track your distance, and how to walk on a bearing – it's all basic stuff. And micro-navigation can be great fun to practice. Try taking up orienteering, because those guys can really navigate!

Often people underestimate how long it's going to take to complete a route. You need to look really closely at what you're doing, what the conditions are like and make an accurate estimate. Make sure you read the weather forecast before committing to a route. Then get out of bed early enough. My mantra, over many years, has been 'get up early, get finished early'. That way, if something untoward does happen, you'll stand a chance of getting off the hill before it gets dark.

Make sure someone knows your intentions before you set off, so that we stand a chance of finding you if things go wrong – you can leave a route card with the police or a loved one. Ensure you know how to use location services on your phone, and that you have sufficient battery life available if you call out Mountain Rescue, because we can often use your location services to find you in an emergency.

If things do go wrong, you can really help yourself by taking a moment to sit down and compose yourself, work out what's actually going on and see if you're capable of solving the situation without assistance. If you're not, don't leave it too late in the day before calling out Mountain Rescue. We will very happily turn around if you've managed to get yourself off the hill, but if it gets dark, it becomes a lot harder for us to find you.

Mountain Rescue teams are all run by volunteers.

ASHLEY COOPER / ALAMY

RECORD YOUR EXPERIENCES

The BMC has launched a near-miss recording system to help walkers and mountaineers learn from mountain incidents. See incidents.thebmc.co.uk

Heather Morning

Mountain Safety Advisor, Mountaineering Scotland

Heather is responsible for analysing accidents and near-misses to help provide training to mountaineers. Earlier in her career, she amassed 17 years' experience with Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Team.

Statistically, there are some very common themes in mountaineering accidents and near misses. In Scotland, around a quarter of all Mountain Rescue call-outs are due to a navigation error. There's anecdotal evidence to suggest there are more people heading into the hills using written route details from websites instead of maps, or using alternative forms of navigation other than a map and compass.

Although the technology we have now is brilliant when used in the right context, it has all sorts of limitations, including user error, battery life and even being unable to operate the technology when wearing gloves. I use a lot of these tools myself, but only in conjunction with map and compass skills. Learning to navigate is not a short, easy hit – it needs you to put in time to get better at it.

When you look at fatality statistics in Scotland, there's a disproportionate number of men involved, particularly those aged over 50. Women are far from a tiny minority in the mountains, but so far this year only two out of 12 mountaineering fatalities were women – and in some years we have zero female fatalities. It could be that men are generally more likely to be risk-takers, or that they're more likely to be overconfident in their abilities.

Safe mountaineering is about how we engage with other people and the world around us to make sure we're not pushed into a situation we can't deal with. Even people with lots of training and experience can make silly decisions when they're blinkered by egos or goals. Peer pressure can be a huge issue for mountaineers, but it's actually the strongest people who are willing to stand up and say, 'no, it's not right to be out today'.

A really important thing any mountaineer can do to help mitigate risk is to be humble. Understand that mountaineering is not about conquering peaks – it's about working with the environment to get the best out of your day.