How do you find an injured hiker stranded in the labyrinth of New Hampshire’s wilderness? How do you carry an injured hiker in a litter down a steep, scrabbly slope during blizzard conditions? How do you hold back tears when you are told a rescue mission is now a recovery mission? Questions like these must be answered quickly and bravely by New Hampshire’s skilled search and rescue teams whenever someone calls for help.
Fish and Game responds to an average of 180 missions every year – finding people lost in the wilderness, helping the injured to safety, tracking down criminals and participating in recovery operations for those who don’t make it. These search and rescue activities are made possible by hundreds of dedicated, courageous and caring people.

Best Laid Plans

While calls for search and rescue come from all corners of the state, the capricious climate of New Hampshire’s White Mountains can challenge even the well-prepared hiker. Hurricane-force winds, low visibility and extreme temperatures may quickly turn an adventure into misadventure. Rescue teams stay busy responding to injured hikers and calls from naïve nature lovers who don’t plan well.

“I’ve gotten calls from panicked hikers who had good intentions, but think all they need on the trail is a pair of sandals and a half-charged cell phone,” said Lt. James Kneeland, who leads Fish and Game’s 16-member Advanced Search and Rescue Team. “They ignore weather predictions and disregard common sense. Then they realize they’re lost, or it’s getting cold and dark – they didn’t leave a plan with anyone, and left home without a flashlight or adequate clothing – and then they need help.”

One ill-prepared hiker asked Kneeland if he could “just call a helicopter” to pick her up out of the wilderness. “No, absolutely not,” he told her. “We reserve helicopters for life-threatening situations. Dense tree growth, elevation and unpredictable weather conditions are some of the reasons – aside from the cost – why we do not often send out a helicopter.”

According to Kneeland, many people have an unrealistic expectation that rescuers can reach someone in the wild within minutes. “I ask hikers, ‘How long did it take you to get to where you are?’ They usually respond sheepishly, ‘a couple of hours.’ We cannot climb a mountain much faster than they can.”

Following the Scent

N.H. Fish and Game’s three Conservation K-9 Officers, Sig, Ruby and Ruger, are often critical to the success of search operations. All three are robust black Labrador retrievers, trained to track and always eager to get to work.

In the summer of 2014, Conservation Officer Mark Hensel and K-9 Sig assisted with a search for a missing child in Rumney. The young boy was on a nature walk with his grandfather around Cranberry Bog. The boy ran ahead and became lost in the woods. When he could not be located, a large-scale response was launched. The area was heavily searched, but no one could find the boy. Sig was able to acquire a track in the area where the boy was last seen by his grandfather. The determined conservation canine and Hensel followed the track of the young boy through a heavily wooded area and swamps for almost a mile; the dog eventually led them to a residence where the child was found hiding.
Funding a Worthy Cause

Fish and Game coordinated more than a thousand search and rescue missions from 2008 through 2014. It costs nearly $360,000 each year to run the program, and around $5,000 to train and provide gear for each Fish and Game Search and Rescue Team member.

Search and rescue efforts are supported by a $1 fee on every New Hampshire boat, All-Terrain Vehicle and snowmobile registration, which brings in approximately $180,000 each year. Since 2008, Fish and Game has had the authority to request reimbursement for rescue costs from hikers determined to be negligent. This brings in a small amount of revenue for the program. Since 2015, voluntary Hike Safe Card sales have also helped, raising $65,000 to $70,000 annually. Generous donations through the Wildlife Heritage Foundation of New Hampshire help defray some costs for both the conservation K-9s and search and rescue gear.

“When funds do not cover the cost of Fish and Game’s mandated duty to provide wilderness rescue, the deficit must be filled by tapping the dwindling Fish and Game Fund,” said Colonel Kevin Jordan, Chief of the Department’s Law Enforcement Division.

Ready and Willing to Help

Fish and Game could not effectively coordinate missions without the help of state and local law enforcement and emergency crews, as well as dedicated volunteer teams. Although found throughout the state, most search and rescue clubs are located near places where there is a distinct need, such as the Franconia Notch area, a popular hiking destination.

What does it take to become a member of a volunteer search and rescue team? A successful volunteer will be in good physical condition, won’t mind being called at odd hours of the day or night, and will have a strong desire to help people.

Some teams are made up of men, women and tracking dogs who are always ready to assist. "Most of us bring our rescue dogs with us just about everywhere we go so we can respond within 15 minutes to a call," said Robyn Millan, president of New England K-9 Search & Rescue.

Search and rescue teams must be prepared for harsh alpine weather conditions and rough terrain.
“We expect every member to attend almost every search, and we require a minimum of 16 hours of training each month, not including drive time,” said Millan. “We look for people who are 100% dedicated to making this a top priority in their lives. This isn’t for everyone!” Potential volunteers need to have flexible schedules and be prepared to pay their own expenses. Millan says her 14 canine handlers are a mix of men and women of varying ages, many of whom have been on the team for more than a decade.

Members of search and rescue organizations must be prepared to show they have what it takes to be a supportive team member. “When applying to our club, a prospective member must prepare for a nine-mile hike that goes over Mt. Lafayette in May,” said John Hansen, president of the Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue Team. “We look to see what a prospective member packs for the hike that will likely involve temperature differentials and inclement weather. Those who don’t show up with the right equipment are encouraged to get more experience and try again.”

Mike Pelchat says his team at Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue is made up of 50 physically fit people from all walks of life and professions, including forest rangers, educators, contractors, accountants and Information Technology personnel. They all share a passion for the outdoors. “Members keep a keen eye on current weather conditions as, unfortunately, the most hazardous weather is often the time when a hiker gets into trouble,” said Pelchat.

Winter rescues above tree line or in ravines require the most equipment. “We pack ice axes, avalanche gear, ice anchors, ropes, crampons, snowshoes, technical boots and clothing, and must have the skill to use them in any weather condition,” explained Pelchat. “When a Fish and Game Officer calls us to assist with a mission, they do not need to second guess the skills and abilities of the members volunteering for the call.” For calls that are more than a mile out and involve injuries, 12 to 18 people are called to duty. Six will carry a litter, and then switch off with six others, as needed.

Do Your Part

Knowing that New Hampshire has some of the best-trained and most dedicated search and rescue personnel at the ready is comforting when one is out enjoying the state’s expansive natural spaces. However, outdoor enthusiasts need to do their part by being prepared and carrying what they need for any type of emergency.

“People heading outdoors to recreate in New Hampshire should act responsibly,” advises Col. Jordan. “Carry a GPS, food, water, warm clothing and a light source. Be prepared.”

For more information about safe hiking, visit hikesafe.com. Find out more about New Hampshire’s nonprofit search and rescue clubs at nhoutdoorcouncil.org.

WJ Associate Editor Becky Johnson is a Public Affairs Officer for N.H. Fish and Game and the Department’s webmaster. She spends her free time as a photographer and freelance writer.

Hiker Deborah Bloomer of Newmarket, N.H., was well prepared for a day in the wilderness, but she injured her ankle while descending Mt. Chocorua. Bloomer was the first known Hike Safe Card holder to be rescued. Hike Safe Cards exempt the holder from certain rescue cost reimbursements and directly support Fish and Game’s Search and Rescue activities. Learn more at wildnh.com/safe.

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