

# Hazards in the High

By Thomas R. Welch and Timothy P. Welch

Over 75 years ago, Bob Marshall was temporarily lost during a solo trek in the Bitterroot Wilderness. Alone, wet, cold and in snowy darkness, he summoned the strength and wit to survive the night and make his way out. From his description, one does not get the sense that he viewed his predicament as one of grave danger.

We have thought of Marshall as we have watched a fascinating phenomenon develop in the High Peaks, as chronicled in *Adirondac*. Despite some trails as wide as country roads, crowds of fellow hikers, radio-equipped rangers and even stewards on some summits, trips into the mountains are increasingly portrayed as hazardous undertakings akin to assaults on K-2. Hoping not to step on too many well-shod toes, we offer here some observations.

## "Accident" reports

The semi-annual Accident Reports in *Adirondac* often lack one crucial element: accidents. One recent winter's report included a fellow whose foot went through the ice and got wet, others who were late getting back to their cars, and a driver stranded in a snowstorm—quite a stretch as a mountaineering accident.

True, occasionally someone dies or is lost or seriously injured in the High Peaks, and these events are not to be taken lightly. But many of them are mishaps that have happened to occur in the Forest Preserve rather than on a city playground. It's typical that deaths in the High Peaks in a given year not exceed two. Unfortunate as these may be, they are eclipsed by accidents in New York State involving hunting (four deaths and 64 injuries in 1993) and boating (26 and 92). In 1993 there were more deaths from hypothermia in New York City (10) than in the Adirondacks. More Americans die from running marathons and playing tennis and golf than from camping in the High Peaks. Perhaps we need a different definition of accidents, or a new name for the column.

The pages of *Adirondac* have also been employed

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Injured skier airlifted  
Missing hiker is  
Rabid raccoons run amok  
**Hikers**  
**rescued**  
Water unsafe  
Forest rangers warn  
**Rescue team search**

to discuss appropriate funding for searches and rescues. Without choosing sides, we ask, "What's the fuss?" More time, energy and money are expended on car crashes, drownings and lost hunters. Most searches in the Adirondacks end with the lost parties either finding their own way out or never being found at all. The occasional rescues involve evacuation of an ill or injured person to a hospital. Thus, the searches are often futile and the rescues less dramatic than those undertaken routinely by urban fire departments. Do they warrant airing in *Adirondac*?

## Bears

Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness is in grizzly territory. As one hikes into the Benchmark entrance area, the presence of this predator is announced by a single foot-high sign showing a profile of the animal and advising hikers to "Be Alert."

The High Peaks Wilderness is home to a few black bear. Yet, hiking in at the Adirondack Loj entrance, one is bombarded with written and verbal warnings and detailed schematics of a bear-bag rigging. DEC personnel visit campsites and lecture campers on

# h Peaks?

# Counterpoint

By Tony Goodwin

*Bear advisory*  
*Giardia lurks : skier on mountain*  
*Blizzard traps skier, Adirondack lake*  
**Mount Marcy Shows No Mercy**  
*Dangerous dis*  
**arc hes High Peaks**

the height to which one's food should be hauled.

The gravity of this threat is not lost on the public. We once heard a youth group leader sternly warn her charges at Marcy Dam to empty their packs of toothpaste for fear of "drawing bear."

What is the actual risk posed by these animals? As best we can judge, it is the loss of a few days' food. And since it is hard to get more than a two-day hike away from a grocery store in the High Peaks, the careless camper who feeds a bear should suffer little more than a spoiled trip. Serves 'em right!

## Water

Upon passing any of the busy entrances to the High Peaks on a summer day, one could easily get the idea he or she was coming into an area whose water quality approximates that of Bangladesh. Pamphlets, posters and ranger admonitions warn of the peril of giardiasis. Trail guides recommend water treatment; additional warnings adorn interior registers.

There is ample evidence that most of this empha-

I agree with the Welches' point that many of the signs and educational materials one confronts when (or before) entering the High Peaks exaggerate the actual dangers. I further maintain that overly dire warnings are really in the long run counterproductive because users who commit some of these "don't's" and still walk out of the woods alive are likely to come to believe that the warnings are all wrong and that they need not obey even common sense guidelines.

However, a trip into the woods exposes individuals to situations different from those faced in daily life. There must be some educational effort to communicate these potential hazards in a way that makes that danger real rather than just theoretical.

As the author of "Accident Report," I have very deliberately tried not to create an atmosphere of hysteria or to create dangers that do not really exist. By choice, the report does not include the total number of incidents to which DEC must respond (nearly 200 a year in Region 5 alone) since an "incident" can include every time a forest ranger answers the phone about an overdue hike and is therefore obliged to make a few more phone calls and then fill out a form. With more phone calls and better reporting there are more incidents but I have not wasted ink documenting some great "accident wave" sweeping the mountains.

The incidents that I select are those that have been reported in the media and that teach a lesson without the "students" actually having to make the same mistake. While a majority of the incidents reported occur in the High Peaks, we do report on accidents from all of the Adirondacks and Catskills. Incidents that rate media coverage are (usually) at least mentioned by way of information so that readers of *Adirondack*, who have seen only a garbled wire service story about some hiker "lost in the Adirondack wilderness" or "hurt in treacherous terrain" can better understand what actually happened. Usually the reality is far less sensational than the media hype.

The other incidents selected for inclusion are those in which there is a lesson to be learned from someone else's misfortune or there is a chance to remind readers that rescues can be long, drawn-out affairs and to be prepared, mentally as well as physically, for that eventuality. TV rescue shows present the most dramatic situations imaginable

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sis is misplaced. The vast majority of giardiasis cases in New York State occur from direct hand-to-mouth spread or in epidemics associated with problematic municipal water supplies. There is no credible evidence that water in the High Peaks is seriously contaminated; most infections are probably passed through suboptimal personal hygiene. Professional wilderness medicine publications, such as *Wilderness and Environmental Medicine*, to which we have contributed, have reflected this changing emphasis for years. Yet we continue to be warned that our waters are befouled.

A curious counterpoint to these warnings has been warnings about *not* drinking water. In the not-too-distant past, an article in *Adirondac* consumed a couple of pages alerting hikers to the dangers of drinking too little. At about the same time we led a group into the High Peaks that was greeted by an assistant ranger enthusiastically advocating the intake of "fluids and potassium." Apparently there is concern that the human thirst mechanism, shaped over millions of years, somehow becomes disabled on state land.

## AIDS

It appears that the risks of life and limb of stepping into the Forest Preserve are growing all the time. One such risk, detailed in an article and subsequent letter to the editor in *Adirondac* in 1994, is the acquisition of blood-borne infection. Writers have stressed the importance of bringing personal protective equipment (rubber gloves, goggles, gown) into the wilderness, for use in the event that one is faced with exposure to blood.

Is this really necessary for average wilderness campers or trip leaders? We think not.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, transmission of AIDS by skin or mucous membrane exposure to infected blood is so extraordinarily rare that the actual risk is too low to define with any precision. The handful of situations in which this has occurred tend to involve prolonged exposure to large volumes of blood from patients with active AIDS. When one considers the types of injuries common to wilderness travel (abrasions, contusions, strains, simple fractures in healthy people), it is clear that the scenario counting as an "exposure" virtually never occurs, and that even when it does the risk is immeasurably small. In the hierarchy of health risks in the High Peaks, acquisition of blood-borne infection is probably less likely than confronting a serial murderer on a trailless peak. Should we all carry sidearms too?

**W**hat accounts for all this brouhaha? Marshall, Colvin and "Old Mountain" Phelps could wax eloquent about the Adirondacks without seeming preoccupied with their imminent demise. Perhaps there is a macho satisfaction

in hiking into an area where even the drinking water is hazardous and bears lurk everywhere.

Or maybe it's that we live in a world where everything is turned into a crisis. Thus we are warned about the risk of acquiring AIDS and succumbing to hypothermia in the High Peaks, when more people are at risk of these conditions in Manhattan.

There may even be an unconscious political agenda at work here. If one views humans as unwelcome interlopers in the wilderness, there may be a perverse satisfaction in perceiving its water as teeming with human waste.

Other than sometimes making us look silly, is any harm being done by all this? Hying recommendations that are not critically examined may distract attention from strategies more likely to be useful. For example, if we truly believe that acquisition of intestinal infection in the wilderness is a serious problem, then rather than plastering interior registers with unfounded recommendations about water treatment we should equip privies with signs promoting hand-cleaning.

Another concern with this approach was highlighted by recent litigation. The very nature of wilderness camping implies a certain irreducible, albeit trivial, level of risk. The more we attempt to eliminate this risk, the less society will be willing to tolerate. Who would have thought until recently that a pair of individuals who got themselves into a life-threatening situation by ignoring advice and widely known principles of wilderness travel could mount a credible suit against an organization that rented them skis?

Hiking and camping in the High Peaks may be one of the safest forms of outdoor recreation going. Yet much of our current safety efforts make us look foolish, divert attention from more serious issues and create the impression that all risks are manageable. Let's all lighten up and find other things to worry about!

**ADK**

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and then resolve them in 60 minutes—with time out for commercials. Hikers must be made aware that such "taxi services" do not really exist. Only by relating the story of a two-day litter evacuation from Cliff Mt. due to low clouds will that reality perhaps sink in.

Analysis can show how a series of seemingly innocuous mistakes can result in a major problem. Such outcomes are usually difficult for one to imagine until one has read about another person engaged in a similar activity who has suffered an unfortunate outcome because of missteps. There is a saying (repeated before in the Accident Report) that "Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from poor judgment." While we all, to some extent, must make our own mistakes, it's better to benefit from reading about others' occasional poor judgment and add their experiences to our own.

**ADK**