

The Trouble with Going Solo

By Thomas Barry

Murphy's Law: If anything can go wrong, it will. Murphy's Law with an addendum for the outdoorsman: If anything can go wrong, it will *when you are by yourself*.

As kids growing up in the Arizona, we were told three things about heading out into the backcountry. Never go into it without an adequate supply of water, never go into it without giving someone your itinerary, and never go into it solo.

In a place where everything has thorns, needles, fangs, claws or venom, breaking those rules is asking for trouble. My high school's janitor—a Santa-bearded, leather-faced man—plunged to his death on a solo trip in the Grand Canyon. A friend of my father's had his ankle bitten by a rattle snake on a solo fishing trip and was lucky enough to be found by another angler a few hours later. Every year greenhorn tourists, seasoned adventurers and plenty of those in between find their way into newsprint as cautionary tales about the dangers of the backcountry.

Loading up on water and giving someone your itinerary are easy. Syncing up with a friend for a trip or shrugging off the need for a little solitude is not. Sometimes the choice you have is going solo or staying home. Sometimes the desire to get away from it all outweighs the potential for disaster. And disaster comes in degrees. Not all of them end in an Alex Supertramp nightmare. Sometimes the disaster is more like a misadventure—inconvenient, expensive but not seriously injurious or worse.

Like the December morning I took a wrong turn on a drive to the Morgan Sister's trailhead in Ohio's Wayne National Forest—a misadventure that led to a scary 2-ton luge ride, nearly getting run over by the 2-ton luge, and the loss of a \$400 Western Mountaineering sleeping bag.

Or the time I went climbing Camelback Mountain on my own and found myself stuck 30' up a sandstone rock face with a serious case of sewing machine leg.

Or the time my beloved dog, Gallagher, nearly choked to death on cactus needles.

Disasters? Yes and no. I'm alive to write about them, but none were fun, and one of them was pretty expensive. I've learned something, though. Going it alone invites trouble. And trouble usually starts with something small and probably avoidable with another set of eyes and ears there to help.

The Wrong Turn

Hiking is easier than it has ever been. When gear has become so light that 30lbs can get you through a week, when every backcountry trail is marked, and every hill and stream is plotted by GPS, the only wild card left is weather. And forecasting technology makes even the weather less of a problem. Bad storm? No problem. Just cancel your trip. Which is what a friend of mine decided to do to our trip to Morgan Sisters when the weekend's forecast called for a mix of rain, sleet and snow.

I could either stay home or go solo. As I packed up my gear, my wife said I was crazy for going. But what was the worst that could happen? Maybe I'd get a little cold and wet.

In my excitement to get on the trail I underestimated the distance I'd driven to the trailhead and made a mistake. I took a wrong turn. The wrong turn led to a blind curve on a narrow road which I rounded without a second thought, a second thought that might've gone something like: Maybe I should stop, get out of my truck, and look around this stand of trees. Before I could stomp on the brakes, my old 4Runner was plunging down a steep muddy hill like a two-ton luge. Because I'd never piloted a luge before, and a muddy hill in Ohio isn't a smoothly groomed luge run, I went down the hill zig-zagging from one bone-jarring tree to another without an ounce of a luge's grace but nearly all the speed.

To make matters worse, once I hit the bottom, I couldn't get back to the top. After several Sisyphean passes at driving out, I was forced to concede that the hill was too steep and the mud too thick.

But, if I couldn't drive out, maybe I could winch my way out.

I took one more pass at the hill and made it about two-thirds of the way up. I set the emergency brake and got out. Another set of eyes may have noticed that my truck was in neutral. As I started pulling the chains and hand winch out of the cargo area, gravity's pull overcame the traction of my tires and the staying power of my hand brake. My truck began sliding down the hill. I jumped out of the way and watched as it rolled past me, picking up speed, until it stopped. Against a tree. With a loud crash. And the sound of braking glass. Indented into the top edge of my lowered tailgate was the perfect half-circle shape of a tree.

It was time to call for help. Thanks to AAA, a nice kid and his girlfriend showed up. "You're not from around here, are you?" the girl asked as her boyfriend rigged the chains.

After pulling me up the hill, they led me to the correct turnoff for the trailhead, only a quarter of a mile further down the road. I'd lost an entire afternoon.

It was snowing.

I was cold and full of mud. But I was determined to salvage some trail time. I set up camp in a sleety drizzle and tried to imagine that I was miles deep in the forest instead of a few feet from the trailhead's parking lot.

In the morning there was half an inch of fresh snow on the ground and the woods were beautiful. I hunted around for a blaze, which wasn't easy—the blazes are white and the trees were covered in wet, sticky snow—but I found one and started out.

Two miles later I was back at the trailhead. I must've missed a spur. I went around again, found the spur and followed it to a dead end a mile

further. Something wasn't right. There were supposed to be a series of 3 connected loops. I hunted around for the rest of the day, but found no more trail. As the sun started going down, I

gave up.

At home the damages piled up: \$60 tow, \$900 used tailgate, and the discovery that the \$400 sleeping bag I'd had lashed to my pack was gone. Worst of all was listening to an I-told-you-so from my wife.

I Think I'm Going to Fall

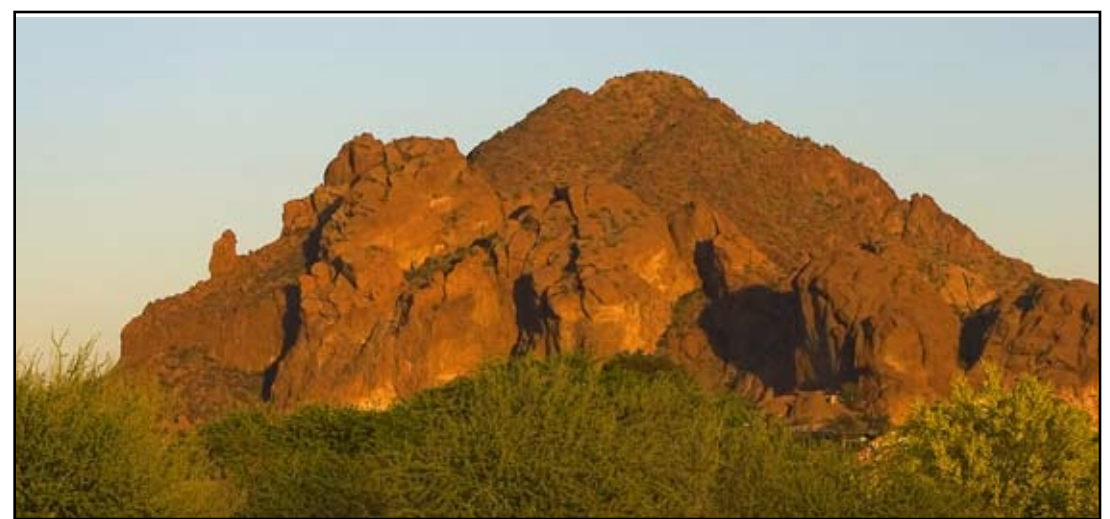
As teenagers my friends and I rock climbed whenever we could, usually on the boulder-like head of Camelback Mountain in the heart of Phoenix. We didn't have any training, or ropes, or any other equipment. We didn't have aspirations of climbing El Capitan. We laced up our tennis shoes and did it purely for fun.

Sometimes we ran into climbers in full gear out for practice. We overheard a group say we were idiots for going up un-roped, which only made us think we were better climbers than we probably were.

There are places on the mountain that we felt like we owned. A natural arch that looks like a socket in a skull we called the eye. A shallow cave that we dropped into through an eroded breach in the sandstone



My old 4Runner wasn't the only stranded vehicle in the Wayne. This old Allis Chalmers tractor must've been abandoned long ago.



Viewed from the south, the majestic head of Camel Back Mountain

we called the pit. And a tiny grass covered ledge at the edge of a 40' cliff we called LGV, or little green valley. We spent a lot of time scouting new, challenging lines to get to these places, but the best one depended on a strategically placed piton that served as the only hand and foothold on a particularly smooth stretch of rock.

I'd climbed the route dozens of times but always with someone. Facing the rock on my own was a different story. I didn't know until then that climbing had as much to do with hanging out with friends as it did with the thrill of getting to the top. Starting up the rock wasn't as easy without someone behind me. The top suddenly looked higher. And half way up, the distance to the bottom looked a lot farther. Instead of feeling thrilled by the climb, I was feeling nervous and jittery. Which probably explains how I got a few feet off the line that led to the piton.

Thirty feet up, I was at a dead end. I could see the piton but it was out of reach. Between me and it was a rough patch of sandstone without a promising next step. After a couple of minutes, my leg started to jerk up and down. I thought I was going to fall.

There are two strong emotions in rock climbing. One is fear. The other is a deep satisfaction that comes from reaching the top. One is primal. The other is spiritual. One is a feeling of rejection. The other is a feeling of connection. Being on my own interfered with that spiritual side of the climb. I only felt fear.

In the end, I slithered down a couple of handholds and made a risky stretch for the piton. At the top, I felt a shaky elation, but for a few minutes on that rock face I thought I was going to die.

Jumping Cholla

Every Sunday I took my golden retriever, Gallagher, for a morning hike in the lush desert surrounding Bartlett Lake, near Carefree, Arizona. The area is dug up here and there by 100-year-old gold mines and tracked by miles and miles of dirt roads. Before the gold mines there were Apaches. Before the Apaches there were the mysterious Hohokam. Gallagher and I would drive the dirt roads deep into the desert and go exploring.

Retrievers like to retrieve. A stick, a ball, a Frisbee, and especially a self-propelled desert mouse are irresistible playthings. Even when the mouse takes refuge under the bristling arms of a jumping cholla, a cactus that doesn't actually jump, but breaks off in chunks at the slightest touch. Thousands of sharp, hooked needles grab hold of your pants, or skin, or the muzzle of your beloved dog. Poor Gallagher looked like he'd grown mutton chops.

His first reaction was to paw them off. Then, he tried to lick them off. In a panic, I pinned him down to the dirt. If he swallowed one of the hooked barbs he would choke to death. The barbs are as thin as a strand of hair but stiff and extremely sharp, which was lucky for Gallagher. They don't slide down the tongue, they pierce it.

If you've ever tried to grab a dog's tongue, you know how slippery it is. If you haven't, take my word for it. And pinching a hair-like cactus needle between your fingers and pulling it out of a dog's tongue is an impossible feat while the dog is squirming to un-pin himself.

If I had someone with me I could've kept Gallagher immobilized and sent that someone back to my truck for a pair of needlenose pliers. Instead, my only option was to try to pull the barbs out of his tongue with my teeth (for the record I'm not the pet owner who let's his dog sleep on the furniture, or who thinks it's cute to let his dog lick his face, or who pins pictures of his dog to the walls of his office cubicle). After several tries the end result was 0 needles in Gallagher's tongue and 1 very painful needle in mine.

With our tongues lolling out of our mouths, we hiked back to my truck. In the sideview mirror, I carefully tweezed the hook with a pair of pliers. That was enough for one day. Or so I thought.

As we drove out, I could hear Gallagher in the back, licking his chops. Maybe I missed a needle? I turned to check on him and *thud*. We stopped moving. The rear differential of my Blazer was sitting on top of a hump on the deeply rutted road, high-centering the truck. With one wheel



Great balls of pain. Sometimes called the teddy bear cholla, the jumping cholla grabs hold of passers-by at the slightest touch with needle-sharp barbs.

spinning free and no locking differential, not even four-wheel drive was going to pull us out.

The desert can be a treacherous place to drive through. I always kept a folding shovel and a few pieces of 2x4 in case I got stuck. For four hours I hacked at the rock-hard dirt, trying to lower the ground beneath the differential enough to gain traction. As it started getting dark, I wondered if, like a shark, mountain Lions could smell blood from long distances. My knuckles were shredded from scraping against the gravel and dripping blood. Not more than 10 miles away a mountain lion attacked a 4-year-old girl and dragged her off. She had suffered serious injuries before her parents managed to scare the animal off. I imagined how my legs sticking out from under my truck would look to a hungry mountain lion—like a couple of lamb chops wiggling around on the ground.

There were no wildlife attacks and Gallagher survived his brush with jumping cholla. When I finally got home, I had several panicked messages from my sister. I did go into the desert alone, but at least I'd left my itinerary with someone (and I had plenty of water). There's no way of knowing whether following the three backcountry rules would've avoided the misadventure. If I'd had a friend with me, Gallagher would've still chased the mouse into the cactus, but I could've avoided getting my tongue pierced. And maybe my friend would've driven while I kept an eye on my dog or shouted a warning about the deep ruts I was about to drive into. But, there's no doubt that having a friend along would've made getting out of the predicament a whole lot faster and easier.

Footnote

Four weeks after my solo trip to the Morgan Sisters trail I went back with a friend. We discovered that

there are two marked trails out of the parking lot: one leading to the dead end I'd followed and the other leading to the true Morgan Sisters loop. We also found my Western Mountaineering bag less than a mile into the hike. Maybe it was just coincidence, but with a friend along the trip went smoothly from start to finish.

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You might ask, what could possibly happen? Plenty. Here's a look at common and not-so-common dangers.

Falling is one of the most common ways hikers are injured or perish. Phoenix-area mountains are the scene of 1 to 2 fatalities per year, and about 100 rescues. In 2003, Camelback Mountain alone was the site of 33 rescues. In one bizarre accident a man was stung by a swarm of hornets while rappelling down a cliff on the head of Camelback Mountain and fell 50' to his death.

Although not mountainous, Ohio has had its share of fatal falls, mostly in the Hocking Hills area where there are deep gorges surrounded by cliffs. In 2004 a young man bent down to retrieve something he dropped and fell 60' to his death.

Mountain lion attacks have been on the rise since the 1990s. The United States has recorded 39 deaths from attacks from 1994 to 2004. In Arizona 2 attacks, one in 2000 and another in 2008, seriously injured 2 small children. There are an estimated 3,000 mountain lions in Arizona, but they are rare east of the Mississippi. Ohio has numerous sightings per year, though none have been confirmed.

In addition to swarming hornets and marauding lions, Arizona is home to 11 species of rattle snakes, responsible for approximately 150 bites per year, and North America's only potentially lethal scorpion, the bark scorpion. Ohio has timber rattlers and copperheads. Personal encounters: 3, all in Arizona while hiking.

Lightning hits approximately 1,000 people per year. Of that number a little less than 70% are struck during outdoor pursuits and many involve the phenomenon known as side flash in which a bolt hits a tree and deflects sideways toward the ground. In 2007 a man was killed and his brother injured at their campsite when a bolt hit a tree and then the brothers.

Falling trees and limbs are also dangerous. A Google search turns up several injuries and fatalities from all over the world. The National Park Service has issued guidelines for dealing with the danger. Once, while hiking in Shawnee State Forest, Ohio, I was awoken by a sickening crack followed by a loud thud. A limb or tree had fallen close enough to shake the earth under my head.