

BACKCOUNTRY SKIING SURVIVAL & RESCUE CHECKLIST

Pre-trip preparation and emergency priorities for winter backcountry travel

1. BEFORE YOU LEAVE

- ☐ Leave a trip plan with a trusted contact: route, trailhead, vehicle, group members, turnaround time and expected return.
- ☐ Check mountain weather, snowfall, wind, temperature, visibility and incoming storms.
- ☐ Check the regional avalanche forecast and understand the day's avalanche problems and danger rating.
- ☐ Download offline maps; verify your phone, GPS and satellite communicator are charged.
- ☐ Set a firm turnaround time and make sure everyone knows the emergency plan.
- !** If conditions exceed your training, equipment or risk tolerance, change the route or turn around.

2. WINTER BACKCOUNTRY ESSENTIALS

- ☐ Map and compass; GPS or offline navigation.
- ☐ Phone plus backup power; satellite communicator when appropriate.
- ☐ Headlamp; emergency bivvy or shelter; extra insulation; waterproof/windproof shell; hat and spare gloves.
- ☐ First aid, medications, fire-starting kit, water, emergency food, whistle, repair supplies and knife or multi-tool.
- ☐ For avalanche terrain: transceiver, probe and shovel - plus the training to use them.

3. IF YOU REALIZE YOU ARE LOST: STOP

- ☐ STOP: Stop unnecessary travel before a small navigation error becomes a larger emergency.
- ☐ THINK: Identify when and where you were last certain of your location.
- ☐ OBSERVE: Assess weather, daylight, avalanche exposure, injuries, group condition and equipment.
- ☐ PLAN: Decide whether staying put or moving to a known safe destination is the better option.
- !** The ski trip is over. Prioritize survival, avoiding additional hazards and getting found.

4. STAY PUT OR MOVE?

- ☐ Stay put when your location is uncertain, darkness is approaching, weather is worsening, someone is injured or searchers are likely looking for you.
- ☐ Move only for a specific safety reason or toward a known destination you can reach without entering dangerous terrain.
- ☐ Do not blindly follow tracks or descend simply because downhill seems easier.
- ☐ If you move, continually reassess terrain, avalanche exposure, daylight and the group's condition.
- !** Wandering is not self-rescue.

5. AVALANCHE EMERGENCY

- ☐ Avoid questionable avalanche terrain merely to find a faster route out.
- ☐ Recognize terrain traps such as gullies, creek beds and depressions that can increase avalanche consequences.
- ☐ If a companion is buried, begin trained companion rescue immediately and summon emergency help as soon as practical.
- ☐ Know how to use your transceiver, probe and shovel before the trip.
- !** Avalanche equipment is not a substitute for education, route planning and sound decisions.

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6. COLD, EXPOSURE & SHELTER

- ☐ Add insulation before you become chilled; protect yourself from wind, snow, rain and ground contact.
- ☐ Manage layers to reduce sweating; damp clothing can accelerate heat loss when you stop.
- ☐ If an overnight stay is possible, establish shelter before darkness and severe exhaustion.
- ☐ Choose shelter away from avalanche runout zones, loaded slopes, cornices, creek channels and unstable trees.
- ☐ Watch for hypothermia: persistent shivering, confusion, poor coordination, slurred speech and unusual fatigue.

7. WATER & ENERGY

- ☐ Drink regularly even when cold weather reduces your sense of thirst.
- ☐ Melt snow for water when practical rather than relying on eating snow.
- ☐ Treat natural water sources when necessary; clear mountain water is not automatically safe.
- ☐ Use the emergency food you carried and conserve energy by avoiding unnecessary travel.

8. MAKE YOURSELF FINDABLE

- ☐ Use a whistle, headlamp, bright clothing, reflective material or other signaling equipment.
- ☐ If staying put, make your location visually distinctive against the snow when safe.
- ☐ If cellular service is available, contact emergency services and provide location, injuries, group size and hazards.
- ☐ If service is unavailable, conserve battery and protect electronics from extreme cold and moisture.
- ☐ Use satellite emergency communication if available and appropriate.

9. BEFORE NIGHTFALL

- ☐ Choose the safest available shelter location and add insulation.
- ☐ Change out of wet layers when possible.
- ☐ Organize water, food, first aid, fire-starting and signaling equipment.
- ☐ Treat injuries before cold and darkness make the task harder.
- ☐ Prepare headlamps and communication devices while you can still see clearly.

10. IF SOMEONE IS MISSING

- ☐ Give authorities the trip plan, intended route, trailhead, vehicle and last known location.
- ☐ Share clothing descriptions, equipment, medical information, phone number and satellite-device details if known.
- ☐ Do not send uncoordinated searchers into dangerous winter or avalanche terrain.
- ☐ Remember that the same weather and terrain threatening the missing person can threaten would-be rescuers.

THE SKI TRIP IS OVER. STAY WARM. STAY OUT OF DANGEROUS TERRAIN. STAY FINDABLE. GET HOME.