

Bridger-Teton National Forest

Mule Kick Incident and Response

Facilitated Learning Analysis

Note from the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center: While this incident did not occur in a wildland fire environment, its story and lessons are applicable to wildland firefighters who may work around packstock during backcountry operations all over the country. The lessons contained in this FLA are therefore applicable to wildland firefighters and to other backcountry operations.

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On August 17th, 2024, Rhonda and Nate, two Wilderness Rangers for the Pinedale Ranger District on the Bridger-Teton National Forest, were working near Horseshoe Lake on a backcountry hitch. They were working with stock, two horses and two mules. These were all U.S. Forest Service animals which they had worked with previously throughout that summer. This was, however, the first hitch where Nate was riding a government horse instead of his personal horse.

They were on the third day of an eight-day hitch in the backcountry and had spent the day clearing trees from wilderness trails using hand tools. Throughout the day they took breaks to stay hydrated and fed. Toward the end of the day, the wind picked up. Gusts were high enough that they left the timbered areas for fear of falling trees.

At the end of the workday, they returned to their camp and stock at Horseshoe Lake. As their work that day did not benefit from having their stock animals with them, they had left their two horses and two mules tied to a highline during the workday and traveled on foot.

Rhonda began their evening stock chores by letting the stock out to graze and walked them down to the lake to drink before filling their water buckets in their pasture. As Rhonda began these chores, Nate sat down at camp to start his dinner because he hadn't eaten much that day.

Before Rhonda took the stock down from the pasture to the lake, she walked up to their camp to check on Nate. She let him know that she was going to water the stock but didn't need help. He, therefore, didn't need to rush through his dinner.

Rhonda returned to the pasture, haltered both horses, let the mules free, and walked down to the edge of the lake. As the horses began to drink she noticed Nate walking up behind them. She had both horses in hand and one mule on either side of them. As all of the animals began to drink, they were facing toward the lake, away from the use trail.

Nate's Injury; Rhonda's Response

Nate walked up from behind one of the mules who was facing the lake. He began to say the mule's name to let the animal know that he was there. As Nate got out the first syllable, the mule kicked out both hind feet—both of the mule's hooves hitting Nate at nearly full extension. Nate fell flat backwards, landing on the grass behind him.

Rhonda ran up to Nate with both horses' lead ropes still in her hand and yelled at him.

When Nate didn't respond she realized that he would need immediate evacuation. She didn't have either her radio or SPOT device on her to call for help. She quickly tied both horses to a tree to ensure the animals wouldn't interfere with the rescue and ran back to their camp to grab her radio, SPOT device, and medical kit.

As Rhonda ran back to the lake shore, she initiated the SOS function on the SPOT device.

When she returned to Nate, he was on all fours, coughing-up blood and vomit. She used her radio to call for a clear channel on the radio: “Emergency traffic only” and detailed the nature of the incident and the need for emergency rescue.

As they waited for the helicopter, Rhonda ran back to their camp to retrieve Nate’s sleeping bag, sleeping pad, warm clothing, and her large backpack. They were able to get the sleeping pad under him, the sleeping bag and warm clothes around him, and the backpack under his armpit to help support his weight. This was all to maintain Nate’s body heat. They were sitting at the wet, muddy edge of the lake and it was beginning to get dark. If rescue was not possible, they would need to be able to keep Nate warm throughout the night to survive.

With Rhonda’s supervisor, Conor’s, remote help, she was able to communicate directly with the Air Idaho helicopter. As the rescue team neared, Rhonda scanned the tree line for the sound of rotor blades. She directed the helicopter toward a flat area beside the lake in the sagebrush. The Air Idaho team touched down at 2135, approximately two hours from when the incident first occurred. (Nate made a full recovery from his injuries.)

The next morning, Conor hiked in to help Rhonda get out of the backcountry. She had stayed the night alone with the stock and cleaned up the mess of supplies that she had brought down to the lake to care for Nate.

As she walked back over to the lake the next morning, Rhonda found the SPOT device she had used and lost track of the evening before to signal for help. She pressed the buttons and noticed it still had power. She realized that she had not terminated the “SOS” feature that she had initiated the night before. There was still a message waiting from Dispatch.

Because she was able to communicate with Dispatch on the radio, she had lost track of the SPOT device during the incident. On her last hitch, two weeks before this incident, Rhonda had gone three days without radio communications in the wilderness. Luckily, on this hitch near Horseshoe Lake, a nearby radio repeater was unobstructed, allowing for clear radio communications.

Lessons Learned

Sharpen Communication Skills

In an emergency, people rely on simple tools that work and training they remember. Newer technology helps, but clear steps and regular practice matter most. *Think about whether your team could use their tools easily and quickly when things get stressful.*

Prioritize Personal Backcountry Preparedness

Fatigue, dehydration, and nutrition quietly erode physical and mental performance. In remote settings, these become safety risks—not just personal choices. *Reflect on whether your team has the knowledge, habits, and conditioning to perform like athletes in demanding environments.*

Invest in Internal and External Relationship Building—Before Crises Occur

The speed and coordination of this response were built on trust and familiarity across teams and agencies. Emergencies aren’t the time to start building these relationships. *Think about the strength of your operational relationships today. Are they ready for tomorrow’s crisis?*

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