

# Humility in the Alaskan Wilderness

BY DARYL R. MILLER

“There are no heroes in the wilderness, just wisemen and men who aren’t so wise,” said Grant Pearson, a ranger in the early days of Denali National Park. He was referring to the simple and harsh rule of the remote north: Survival was your responsibility and no one else’s. A lot has changed since Ranger Pearson conducted solo snowshoe patrols in the backcountry in 1925, but the simple idea of personal responsibility in the wilderness is still a timely rule to live by.

Alaska has long been regarded as the “last frontier,” with some of the most remote and rugged wilderness terrain on earth. The quest for solitude and adventure lures thousands of enthusiasts from around the world into the Alaska backcountry each year. These wilderness journeys offer stimulation, natural quiet, and a place to appreciate our small but important place in this world.

A hundred years ago wilderness survival skills were a way of life in the United States. We have grown socially and culturally forgetful that people not too long ago simply learned or died. Today most people live in metropolitan environments and grow up in an urban culture where wilderness travel and survival skills are rarely learned. The result is that many wilderness-bound travelers have unrealistic expectations about their knowledge and abilities and about the responsibility of society to come to their aid in remote settings.

Each year in Alaska, agencies and volunteer rescue groups conduct backcountry searches and rescues that should never have been needed. Unfortunately, some of these incidents result in fatalities. Many of these accidents occur as a result of people forgetting, or refusing to acknowledge, that the most important trip objective and their first priority is a safe journey out and back. An assessment of numerous mishaps in the Alaskan wilderness shows that a great number of rescues and deaths involve people who have underestimated the consequences of their decisions. They didn’t intention-

ally set out to get rescued or die but because of mistakes made about their own safety, that’s where they ended up. There are a variety of reasons for accidents in the backcountry and wilderness, and there are many adventurers who unnecessarily end up in harm’s way.

## A Spectrum of User Safety Problems

On one end of a spectrum of safety problems are people who enter into the backcountry unaware of the dangers because of their inexperience. Outdoor proficiency should come from a long, mentored apprenticeship that presents opportunities to deal safely with precarious situations. But there are fewer and fewer opportunities for those skills to be learned in wilderness settings today. The journey for the inexperienced typically starts with inadequate equipment preparation or insufficient attention to other planning details, which exposes them immediately to many environmental hazards. In Alaska, this lack of preparation, along with small mistakes, can then be compounded by severe weather, rugged terrain, and remoteness. Inexperienced travelers are often more dependent on equipment and less on their own competence in wilderness settings, and they lack the experience to apply sound judgment to their situation. Compounding the threat to their safety, they choose not to leave a trip itinerary with anyone and consequently no one knows where to look for them when they do not return. Some people feel that the rugged terrain and remoteness of the Alaska wilderness impedes their ability to get back on their own and consequently justifies a rescue.

At the other of the spectrum is a very skilled and elite group of backcountry users. They are often multitasked and proficient, with many outdoor skills. They are typically



Article author Daryl Miller (photo by Judy Alderson).



**Figure 1—Responsibility, education, and accountability are the primary tools for self-sufficiency in Alaska wilderness travel. Article author Daryl Miller crossing the Alaska Range in early March with a -30F° temp and a 30-plus knot wind. Photo courtesy of Daryl Miller.**

good athletes attempting intense pursuits that allow for no mistakes. Their quests include a variety of sports, including climbing unforgiving mountain routes or paddling raging rivers with extreme class rapids. These types of risk takers have chosen to embark on adventures that will put them in harm's way with no room for miscalculations. Some of their accidents, however, result from a lack

of fear, which masks the dangers of testing their outdoor skills and abilities. I was once told by a rodeo contractor that courage is "controlled fear," and when people lack fear they cannot make good decisions about staying alive.

In between these two groups are people who are generally prepared and understand the risks but often succumb to an unplanned medical emergency or experience an unusual act of nature, both of which are difficult to anticipate.

Wilderness users of all types sometimes fail to make the right choices due to an inaccurate assessment of their own capabilities. Unfortunately, our virtual-reality society has some problems in recognizing risk. Some

backcountry users have come to believe that risk is a quest instead of a warning. The "fearless" philosophy also pushes visitors to navigate recklessly in the backcountry regardless of the elements or the possible consequences. This concept operates on a gamble at best, with a faulty understanding of possible injuries and the false premise that help is just a call away. Moreover, this attitude can sometimes create a dangerous and unnecessary situation for the people called upon to save them.

### **Judging the Risks as a Climbing Ranger at Denali**

Working as a rodeo clown in Montana during the 1970s, I was expected to free every cowboy hung up in a rope or save each one from being mauled by a bull. My work decisions were not based on considerations for my own safety but more on saving the cowboy's life regardless of what happened to me. This was a very high-risk and injury-prone job, which never even paid my medical bills. I quit after some significant injuries forced me into retirement, and I took up mountain climbing, which seemed much safer in contrast. I could at least manage the risks I chose in climbing mountains.

As a mountaineering ranger I look at life differently than I did during my rodeo days. My first attempt to climb Denali in 1981 ended up as a humbling experience for me. I suffered

from altitude sickness, physical exhaustion, and depression. Our expedition endured a brutal nine-day storm at 17,000 feet in which we lost tents and some of our equipment. I also had my ego checkmated at 19,000 feet and left Alaska demoralized because I didn't summit. It was not until years later that I understood how valuable that lesson in humility would be.

After that trip I came back time and time again, learning more about Denali and understanding why I needed patience to climb big mountains. I witnessed many tragic climbing accidents during those years. They were mostly caused by human error, beginning with impaired judgment and then compounded by extreme altitude, relentless winds, and severe cold. I know now, after numerous body recoveries, that many mistakes in judgment are never fully realized until it's too late.

My responsibility now is to oversee search-and-rescue operations in Denali National Park and Preserve. My primary job is to minimize the risks during missions to ensure that all our staff return safely after each incident. That duty is very clear to me after two of my volunteers tragically died on mountaineering patrols while climbing Denali. It is a personal nightmare, especially if you are in charge. It was also emotionally overwhelming to even attempt to understand the families' grief when I tried to explain what happened. The lives of these two families stopped in time and will never be the same. These two tragic incidents have forever changed my life and particularly how I look at wilderness rescue. It reinforces the fact that not everyone will get rescued on my watch, especially when the risk is too great for our staff.

Technology has made it possible to call for rescue from almost anywhere, making backcountry travel seem sim-

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pler and less risky. However, in today's world most rescue attempts are screened before they are launched with a careful risk assessment for the rescuers' safety. Safety factors alone could determine whether or not the rescue is launched or a victim is rescued. Backcountry users starting a trip should firmly understand that rescuer safety is the first priority and the victim a distant second. Rescue inside wilderness areas is not always assured and by no means automatic.

Through the years I have heard some climbers and backpackers complain that rangers or other rescue groups were not needed and were even an infringement on their outdoor experience. Some of the same people that complained ended up being rescued and were of a different mind afterward. Most of us will never need a rescue, but if we do we all want the fastest and best rescue possible. Rescue is an act of caring and valor. Most victims feel extremely grateful, and in hindsight they never imagined it would happen to them.

## Controlling the Risks of Wilderness Travel and Rescue in Alaska

The wilderness environment in Alaska is some of the most challenging and committing terrain in the world. Barriers include icy cold glacial rivers, huge snow-covered glaciers with deep hidden crevasses, and vast mountain ranges up to 20,000 feet that create their own extreme weather patterns. This environment is extremely unfriendly to humans who ignore basic warning signs about impending weather events. It is indifferent and unforgiving, caring nothing about your résumé, how long you have lived in Alaska, or previous backcountry experience. It provides harsh penalties for the unprepared attempting

river crossings or alder bashing during backcountry treks. On top of that, the Alaskan scale is easily underestimated. Many people set unrealistic expectations. Ten miles cross-country in the trailless wilderness is not equivalent to 10 miles on trail systems—it is more like 30 or 40 trail miles. There are some additional fundamental rules of the wilderness, especially here in Alaska. For example, bears have the stream rights, berry rights, fishing rights, and the complete right-of-way whenever encountered. Simple but unforgiving rules in the Alaskan backcountry demand total respect; when they are ignored, we can be subjected to nature's wrath.

Given that, trips into the Alaskan wilderness are some of the most rewarding on earth. My experience tells me you are much safer in the wilderness with sound and prudent judgment than on Alaska's winter highways with the increased darkness, slick roads, unpredictable moose, and drivers who travel too fast for conditions. In the wilderness you consistently have control of your own destiny if you understand your risk and make timely and prudent decisions where your personal safety is involved.

In my job I have focused on educating backcountry visitors through written materials and verbal briefings on potential backcountry hazards, self-sufficiency, and resource protection. Our own personal backcountry experience is important because we can convey firsthand information and the self-sufficiency message with credibility. I believe responsibility, education, and accountability are the primary tools for self-sufficiency in wilderness travel. A humble approach to the wilderness gives us a far-reaching awareness of our surroundings. This attitude creates a pattern of be-



**Figure 2—Everyone has responsibility to maintain self-sufficiency in the wilderness and should always base decisions on getting back on their own. Denali climbers pack up for an extended stay on the mountain. Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute photo.**

havior that will be more effective in making sound decisions about your own safety. Adventures in the wilderness come with a personal and a moral responsibility to make all decisions based on returning unaided and safely on your own. Only friends and family will know when you do things right and get home safe, but thousands of *Anchorage Daily News* readers will know if you are rescued.

The definitive wilderness experience for me in Alaska is a remote setting, untamed and full of unsafe experiences in a trailless landscape. It is a place where I can be away from the luxuries of civilization and traveling on foot without the aid of motorized transportation. It is where the forests and animals have unconditional rights and are greatly protected from human-caused destruction. Encounters with other people are low to none, and there is no expectation of immediate help for any emergencies from anyone for any reason. It's a place where rescue is not automatic or guaranteed, and where words are stamped in bold letters on the educational brochures or on a backcountry permit "YOUR emergency may not be OUR emergency" and made plain before you embark. It

is a place where all of us have a personal responsibility for leaving no visual signs of our visit, allowing for the next adventurers to have the same pristine and isolated experience. And it is where our humility and sound judgment take us on the journey of a lifetime, and return us on our own power to our everyday world.

I have realized through my years that wilderness has given me some of the best and most devastating moments of my life. I now walk in peace in the backcountry knowing that I don't need to search for challenges, as being there is challenge enough. I organize my own backcountry trips and the trips of those who work for me around these basic principles:

- Everyone has responsibility to maintain self-sufficiency in the wilderness and should always base decisions on getting back on his or her own. Failure to recognize your own limitations in the wilderness can put you immediately in harm's way.
- The wilderness scale is easily underestimated in regards to terrain, leaving people unrealistic about trip expectations—especially mileage per day.
- Glaciers and glaciated rivers are significant barriers that always demand respect and planning.
- Your best resource is the ability to think in a controlled manner when a life-threatening crisis is happening.
- Educate yourself on the logistics and current conditions before attempting trips into the wilderness.
- Remoteness compounds problems that otherwise might be manageable.
- Avalanches are regularly underestimated, especially their speed and power.
- A well-thought-out and responsible contingency plan should be established for self-evacuation before your trip.
- Prevention, not treatment, is what ultimately will save your life in the wilderness.
- Failure to leave important information with the right people regarding trip plans has cost numerous lives and resulted in unnecessary searches.
- The ability to improvise and use available resources is often the key to survival in emergency situations in the wilderness.
- Panic and confusion have long been inseparable partners and are your constant adversaries during an emergency.
- There is a notable difference between a gamble and a calculated risk. A calculated risk considers all the odds, justifies the risk, and leads to an intelligent decision based on conservative judgment. A gamble is something over which you have no control and whose outcome is like a roll of the dice.
- You cannot make intelligent decisions in the wilderness if you do not understand the risks.
- Firsthand knowledge of your mistakes on previous trips into the wilderness is often an invaluable tool when making significant decisions regarding your life.
- Never give up, as the will to live is a valuable asset. People often perish simply because they fall short on perseverance.
- Getting into an accident in the wilderness is like a bad relationship—typically easier to get into than get out of.
- Wilderness rescues are often dangerous to the rescuers, and the ability to accomplish them is always weather dependent.
- People do not realize the devastating impact that their accidents have on friends and loved ones.
- The prerequisite to misadventure is the belief that you are invincible or that the wilderness cares about you.

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DARYL R. MILLER is the South District ranger for Denali National Park and Preserve, directing search and rescue on Denali. He was the first American to be awarded the Targa D'argento (the Silver Solidarity Medal), the international alpine community's highest accolade, honoring perilous mountain rescues. He has also received the Valor Award from the U.S. Department of the Interior for his rescue work. He and fellow Alaskan Mark Stasik completed the first winter circumnavigation of Denali and Mount Foraker in 1995 (350 miles/45 days).