

Prepare properly for outdoors, rescuers warn

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A simple item like a whistle can save your life in the backcountry, a search-and-rescue member says, as many outdoor enthusiasts gear up for their first trips of the year this long weekend.

Juan de Fuca search-and-rescue crews recently had a call after an injured hiker near China Beach used his whistle to get the attention of a person nearby, said Victoria Clarke, co-ordinator of Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue.

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The man had been seriously injured in a fall and was at risk of hypothermia when he was found by someone walking his dog. The bystander initially thought he was hearing a bird call before realizing it was a call for help, Clarke said. He followed the sound, found the injured man, and called 911.

The incident highlights the importance of packing the 10 essentials whenever heading into the outdoors, no matter how long the trip is, Clarke said.

The essentials include a light source, fire-making kit, whistle or mirror, extra food and water, extra clothing, a navigation and communication device, a first-aid kit, emergency shelter, a pocket knife or multi-tool, and sun protection.

Everyone heading into the backcountry should also check the weather forecast, think about how much daylight they'll have, and consider the abilities of everyone they're travelling with. It's also important to familiarize yourself with the trail or activity you're planning, including the distance and terrain, Clarke said.

It's about planning for the worst-case scenario, she said. "Things go wrong, accidents happen, and so you need to be prepared for that."

Anyone heading into the mountains this long weekend should remember there's still "a significant amount of snow" and freezing overnight temperatures in the alpine and prepare accordingly, said Paul Berry, search manager of Comox Valley Search and Rescue.

Outdoor enthusiasts should check avalanche bulletins and carry a shovel, probe and transceiver in case of an avalanche, he said.

The B.C. Search and Rescue Asso-

ciation issued a reminder that familiar territory can lead to a false sense of security.

Between 2022 and 2024, 95 per cent of search-and-rescue cases in B.C. involved people who were close to home.

B.C. AdventureSmart provides resources on what to pack, videos with tips for specific hiking trails and a summer webinar series, including sessions focused on how to prevent and respond to slips, trips and falls.

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A simple fall can quickly become an emergency situation if someone is unable to walk, she said. It could take a few hours for a search-and-rescue crew to arrive, and if bad weather is moving in or night is falling, you might have to shelter overnight. That means you'll need warm clothes, food and water, and shelter from the elements, Riches said.

"Your destination is home, by the way. It's not the peak," she said. "That's only halfway."

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Port McNeill, Port Hardy and Alert Bay — that was supposed to provide stability after months of revolving overnight closures.

Under the plan, Port McNeill Hospital would be the only acute-care hospital ER in the region open 24 hours a day. ER services would be available from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Port Hardy's hospital and from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Cormorant Island.

Politicians and health officials said regular 24-hour ER availability was to be restored "as soon as possible."

A year later, with little movement on the promise to restore full-time ER service, five North Island doctors said in a letter to the B.C. Medical Association (Doctors of B.C.) and Health Ministry that they had fewer physicians "and there has actually been very little stabilization taking place."

The issue of ER closures throughout the province became an election issue in the fall of 2024 after which new Health Minister Josie Osborne was given a mandate to pay special attention to health care in rural communities.

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Corbett-Labatt maintains the province and health authority are working hard to restore around-the-clock service.

"I know they are trying to get it back to 24/7 but based on the shortage of health-care workers, not just doctors, but nurses and others, it's been a challenge, I think way more of a challenge than anyone ever expected," said Corbett-Labatt.

The B.C. Nurses' Union alone maintains it has 6,000 vacancies for nurses. The province is also trying to tackle the physician shortage, most recently focusing on fast-tracking recruitment of physicians from the United States.

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