

## **The Safety Site**

**Monica Palmer, Safety Administrator**

### **Recreational Safety takes Responsibility & Control**

In continuing with republishing safety articles from the Safety Story Contest of 2020, please see the article here that was sent in by Bruce Schmidt. After originally reading this interesting article, I told Bruce that he must have 9 lives like a cat. Thank you, Bruce, for such an interesting article.

#### **The Second Mistake**

**Bruce Schmidt**

Like many in the Reno Ski and Rec Club, I have been fortunate to participate in a wide variety of activities over the years, many of which might be considered risky by some. Some of these required formal instruction, such as SCUBA diving and flight training; others required less formal training, such as rock climbing, whitewater rafting and spelunking; and some required no formal instruction at all, such as skiing (a bad way to learn to ski!) and hunting.

In the course of learning to enjoy these activities, I don't recall which one, an instructor made the observation that it is the second mistake that kills you! The point was that if you don't make the first mistake of failing to adequately prepare for the activity, then when something goes wrong you are prepared to deal with it; otherwise you could be in real trouble. I have always remembered that advice, but admit that I didn't always follow it correctly, sometimes with almost disastrous results. Some personal experiences and observations might help illustrate.

At a SCUBA training class at Lake Powell, one of our class members, Mark, was very uncomfortable in, and particularly under, the water. This was obvious to all of us, instructor and students alike. Mark apparently wanted to appear macho, and his first mistake was to insist that he was fine and wanted to continue training. Near the end of the class we did a night dive, which was really quite fun. However, when Mark and his partner did their night dive, we could see their lights headed out to deep water. And in Lake Powell, deep means DEEP! The partner surfaced and yelled that Mark had simply raced off headed away from shore to deep water and he couldn't catch him to turn him around. The instructor raced out into the lake and swam down the stream of bubbles and was able to grab Mark and turn him around. If the instructor had not been alert and capable, there is a good chance we would no longer have our friend Mark!

On a rock climbing trip to City of Rocks in southern Idaho, we were hiking in to begin a climb, but didn't think much about the new, inexperienced climbers who were hiking with us. We had to cross a large, sloping slab of decomposing granite which was sandy and somewhat slick. Our first mistake was to not suggest that the inexperienced climbers should rope up to cross the slab. One of those newbies' boots started to slip on the sandy rock, and he instinctively, but incorrectly, leaned into the rock slab, causing his shoes to lose even more grip. He was sliding toward a sheer drop. Luckily, one experienced member of the group ran below the slipping hiker and used his hands to block the boots from slipping further. We roped him up, and completed the hike and then had a fun climb on a granite pinnacle.

As a fisheries biologist in NE Utah I was out with my crew on the Green River below Flaming Gorge Dam to do fish sampling with an electric shocker. It was night, and the lights on our boat illuminated a white object at the bottom of a pool in the river. It was a T shirt, and someone was still in it! It turned out to be a paleontologist from Dinosaur National Monument who had been reported missing earlier that evening after leaving to go fishing. Based on the location, he had apparently crossed the river on a shallow riffle. But, given the fact the dam produced power in a 'peaking' manner and the river usually rises in the afternoon, crossing the riffle was the first mistake. We surmise that when he tried to cross back at the end of the day (the second mistake) the water was too high and he washed off the riffle into the pool below, where he tried but failed to get out of his waders. He only got one foot free. This incident proves that a second mistake can be deadly

My biggest first mistake was to attempt to cross a cliff face without a rope or belayer. I was actually deer hunting and had not anticipated any rock climbing. But, after a long hike alone (I had split up from my hunting buddy) I came to a cliff I could not go around at its base because the river was too deep to wade. I was exhausted and did not want to hike all the way back and then up and around the cliff. I saw a ledge crossing the cliff and decided to use it. However, it sloped upward, and after I was past the water at the base, I was 30 feet above the ground and could not safely jump down as planned. I decided to continue to cross on the ledge to the other side of the cliff face (my second mistake), but the ledge petered out, and I slipped off. The cliff was vertical, and I didn't even touch it as I fell. The good news is that I can report that you don't feel the impact of a fall! But, when I regained my senses, I was lying on my back on the bottom of the river! Why was I even alive? The water there was shallow, and I sat up and immediately saw thousands of splinters of wood floating around me. My rifle strap was still across my shoulder, but there was no rifle stock to speak of, only the splinters. The only thing I can figure is that the rifle across my back caught between two rocks as I fell over backward on impact, and the shattering stock absorbed the force that would otherwise likely have killed or crippled me. The force of the fall and shattering stock had flung me into the river. A totally smashed ankle, several dislocated fingers and various lacerations were my only injuries. I counted myself extremely lucky that was all! My getting out of the canyon after the fall is another, longer story! Luckily, my partner was able to hear my shouting and come to my assistance. At least I didn't make the mistake of going out hunting alone.

Based on these and other examples, I can personally attest to the validity of the adage 'It's the second mistake that kills you'. Sometimes you can get lucky and not actually die, but counting on luck is not a useful plan. A much better plan is: "Don't make that first mistake!"