

SEARCH HAZARDS

There are many hazards to our safety during search situations. These hazards may be natural or manmade and may exist where we least expect them. A hazard is ANYTHING that can harm or hinder our dogs or ourselves during the course of a search mission. We must avoid these hazards in order to do our job -- search for the missing person.

Hazards can be roughly divided into two broad categories: NATURAL and MANMADE. Sometimes it appears that what mom nature doesn't come up with man can. When we take a close look at what we do and how we do it, it's a wonder more injuries do not happen. What follows is only an overview of POTENTIAL HAZARDS:

NATURAL HAZARDS

Natural hazards have been broken down into the sub-categories:

- TOPOGRAPHIC
- VEGETATIVE
- WEATHER
- TIME OF DAY
- ANIMALS AND INSECTS

TOPOGRAPHIC

Topographic hazards are those which exist due to geologic conditions. One of the better reasons for learning to read "topo" maps is to be able to identify and be aware of these natural safety hazards. A number of geologic features come to mind:

- cliffs
- drainages
- swift water
- swamps and bogs
- altitude (generally high altitude)
- "scree slopes"
- rock overhangs

Most of these hazards are self evident. However cliffs don't have to be very high to be of danger to the searcher or their dog. A cliff as "low" as 4-5 feet (may not show up on a topo map) can cause a lot of damage. Most people will be respectful of a thundering swift water situation but not recognize a stream which "runs silent" but strong. The lesson here is take a good look at the situation and use all your knowledge to make a safe decision. (The purpose of this paper is only to point out hazards not to teach all the knowledge necessary to protect one's self.) Swamps and bogs present basically as a "nuisance" to searching. There are the stories of "quick sand" that have not been substantiated. What may exist are deep pools of liquefied mud/sand, which can be of danger. In swamps always "try out" the next step before committing your weight. Drainages may not seem to be dangerous but may be during times of heavy rains that may result in "flash floods." Try to stay up on the sides of particularly steep drainages during heavy rains. High altitude is not of much importance in the East but in the West particularly in a certain state high altitude may cause various types of physical problems. If you attend a seminar or take part in a mission at high altitude be aware of the problems. If you've never had to walk on a "scree slope"(broken rock -- from golf ball to basketball size) you'll not discover why "send aways" and "directionals" are important.

VEGETATIVE

- poison oak/ poison ivy
- thick brush
- briars
- saw grass
- foxtails
- "Deadfalls"
- vines

It is of utmost importance for EVERYONE to be able to recognize the poison oak/ poison ivy family. While there is no immediate problem, we all know that in 12-24 hours there is a problem. Severe cases of poison oak/ivy could keep a searcher out of the field, so beware! Thick brush such as laurel honeysuckle can definitely make your day (or night) miserable, but while they are fraying your nerves you may make an angry mistake. Also along with the vines such as honeysuckle and kudzu brush has the delightful ability to grab your feet and toss you on your can. You should be aware that critters such as snakes like places like honeysuckle and kudzu to hide. Scared anybody off yet??

Briars and "saw grass" (found in swamps -- has "saw" like edges and will cut you) create small lacerations which if they become infected become a real nuisance, as well as making you look like you walked through a meat grinder.

"Fox tails" were, I thought, a long forgotten memory from a far west state, but no they are to be found on the Manasas Battlefield Park. These little buggers are the seeds of various kinds of grasses that are like "arrow heads." The barbs allow the seed to travel only one direction in the body, usually to no good. A good combing of your dog after a training session usually does the job.

"Deadfalls" are dead limbs on trees, usually high in a tree, which can fall on you during high winds. When moving through the woods during strong winds be aware of the trees around you.

WEATHER

- snow
- cold
- heat
- Heavy rains
- lightning
- hail
- ice

The weather can be one of our most severe hazards. Any extreme of weather from cold to hot, and from snow to heavy rain present at the least discomforts and at the worse, danger to life. Cold weather requires increased clothing protection, increased caloric intake (hooray)!, and increased fluid intake. (With the decrease in humidity and the colder air - which can hold more moisture).

Heat presents a major cooling problem plus an increased need for fluids. Humid days are worse than drier days. Extra rest periods for you and your dog during work at the hottest times of the day.

Severe precipitation such as heavy rains, snow, hail, and ice are hazards not only during a search but also create major safety problems for the drive to and from the search. Heavy rains can cause "Flash floods" which are extremely dangerous especially in mountainous terrain. Snow and ice create sometimes severe slipping and falling hazards.

TIME OF DAY

- night
- dusk

Night time searches are dangerous. Only by learning to navigate and move through the woods at night with confidence, will the safety factor increase. Dusk presents a special problem, in that, the human eye takes time (15-30 minutes) to adjust to the lower light. Also some wild life (deer) start moving at dusk so be careful driving at that time.

ANIMALS AND INSECTS

- bees
- spiders
- ticks
- chiggers
- feral or loose dogs
- snakes
- other critters

Bees -- if you are allergic CARRY AN ANI KIT!!!!

Spiders -- keep your fingers out of dark places like wood piles and ledges.

Ticks -- nuff said!!! Ask any Dogs East operational member for a two hour seminar!!!!

Chiggers -- terrible irritation in the wrong spot!! Don't sit on dead logs.

Snakes -- again don't put body parts in places snakes like -- such as -- under rocks and logs, cool spots on hot

Days and warm spots on cool days.

Other critters -- remember all mammals can carry rabies -- so...keep dog vaccinated and stay away from strange acting animals.

MANMADE HAZARDS

- chemical/ toxic
- roads/ streets
- architectural
- railways
- Media
- suspects

Chemical and toxic hazards are probably the most severe, most dangerous, a hardest to identify safety hazards that we will encounter. To understand chemical hazards, "HAZMATS," I suggest the 8 hour HAZMAT AWARENESS course taught by the State of Virginia Fire Programs folks. The best advice is to SURVEY EACH SCENE BEFORE YOU ENTER!!!! In other words don't be a bull-in-the-china-closet and rush into something(that you can't back out of). Hazmats can be found everywhere from pesticides/herbicides in agriculture, to harsh chemicals under your kitchen sink, to illegal waste dumps. SO.....BEWARE!!!!!!

Roads and streets present an obvious problem. Control of your dog and an awareness of road locations will go a long way in preventing problems. Put a vest on your dog when working anywhere near a road.

Before you enter any building, whether during a disaster search or any search, survey the situation (heard that before?) and be aware of any potential safety hazards, such as rotten floor boards, overhangs, etc.

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Safety in buildings is a complex subject and is covered in disaster training. If you have any questions talk to one of the disaster team members. Use common sense when entering any building, look around and up.

Railroads can be a serious problem, particularly when you're on the track, a train is coming, and you have nowhere to go. Don't let yourself be caught in that situation! Always give yourself an escape route and have control of your dog.

The media can become a problem if you allow them to distract you from your job. Stop, and either talk to them for a short time or tell them to back off, then ignore them. Always focus on the job at hand, don't walk off that wall or into a ditch because you're distracted, and boy can they distract you!!

Suspects - It is possible to find yourself walking either with a potential suspect or any unsavory character. Don't panic, just call for "ROMEO ALPHA" give your coordinates, help will arrive soon!! Try to know the person that will be walking with you BEFORE you leave search base.

Remember this is only a quick overview of potential hazards. Ask questions, take a HAZMAT AWARENESS course, and **BE AWARE OF THINGS AND SITUATIONS AROUND YOU.**

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