

WILDERNESS FIRST AID IN ACTION

by Larry Keyes M.S.

The northwest corners of the states of Montana and Wyoming contain some of the largest and most beautiful wilderness areas in the lower 48 states. Montana's Crown of the Continent Ecosystem features Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. Of the 1,051,500 acres that make up Glacier Park, 1,013,100 of these acres are still wild with no roads. Elevations range from 3,200ft to 10,446ft and the Continental Divide separates the park into two nearly equal parts.

The Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex consists of almost 2.5 million acres which includes the Great Bear Wilderness (286,700 acres) the Bob Marshall Wilderness (1,009,356 acres) and the Scapegoat Wilderness (239,296 acres). Elevations range from 3,936ft to 9,411ft.

Wyoming's Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem contains two national parks (Yellowstone and Grand Teton) and eight wilderness areas. South of Yellowstone is the Wind River Range, the largest mountain range in the state of Wyoming, boasting 40 peaks over 13,000ft and one million acres of wilderness. Both ecosystems contain the country's most complete assortment of wildlife including lynx, wolverine, mountain lion, black bear and grizzly bear.

Glacier has one horseback riding concession operating at three different locations throughout the park, which conducts over 15,000 rides and pack trips each summer. All of the wranglers that work at these stations in Glacier Park are trained in the ECSI Wilderness First Aid program. Prior to 2006, the National Park Service required basic first aid training for organizations working in the park. The standard for new organizations working in the park after 2006 is training in wilderness first aid. This upgrade from basic first aid to wilderness first aid training is occurring in other wilderness locations as well. Many outfitter associations throughout the country now realize that wilderness first aid training is better designed to meet their needs and is more readily available than ever before.

Swan Mountain Wilderness Guide School was the first and still the only hunting guide school to use the ECSI Wilderness First Aid program as the standard of training for first aid in all of our outfitter and guide programs. Our courses are 30 days long which allows plenty of time for hands on training. Students that graduate from the school find employment at guest ranches and outfitters throughout the United States and Canada. Occasionally, we have the opportunity to train and work with members of wilderness search and rescue organizations. While many search and rescue team members are trained as wilderness first responders or wilderness EMT's, wilderness first aid training is the minimum standard of training for many.

Over the years, through contact with past students now working in wilderness occupations, we have been able to identify the most common types of wilderness emergencies for our graduates in the aforementioned areas of the country. As might be expected, most injuries that occur to clients and wranglers that participate in daily trail ride programs, are minor horse related injuries such as a horse stepping on a clients foot. Occasionally a rider may fall from a horse and have a more serious type of injury, however helmets greatly reduce the number of head trauma injuries.

People working as outfitters and guides or mounted search and rescue members also encounter minor horse related trauma injuries but due to the nature of work, time of year (usually during fall hunting season) and a longer stay in the wilderness, they also encounter other wilderness related emergencies. Hypothermia is always a concern in fall hunting camps where the weather is very unpredictable. Altitude sickness is a problem in the Wind River Range where clients may come from sea level and will travel to elevations of over 10,000 ft. on horseback. Insect bites and stings are common on summer fishing trips, and a real concern in both Montana and Wyoming are encounters with grizzly bears. Encounters with wild animals especially grizzly bears is an important part of our wilderness first aid training.

Another important skill that we emphasize during wilderness first aid training is the ability to improvise with the equipment that you have with you and the resources available to you in the wilderness. I have been amazed at the different types of stretchers splints and rescue equipment that have been improvised from horse packing equipment.

Wilderness medicine has come a long way in the past 20 years. Wilderness first aid training programs are more available than ever and are becoming the standard of training in many areas of the country. I have had the opportunity to participate in great number of wilderness EMT, wilderness first responder and wilderness first aid training programs over the past 30 years. In my opinion the ECSI wilderness first aid program is at the top of the list.