

pass/fail



THE CHALLENGE

Get Unlost

After losing the trail, can this wayward hiker find her way back? By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan

Getting lost in the desert is never an attractive proposition. But it's especially unwelcome in February, when the warm days turn suddenly to chilling nights, the light jacket you're wearing is already feeling too thin, and your trail mix is down to just a few raisins.

That's exactly the situation I found myself in during

a dayhike gone awry in Canyonlands National Park. A boyfriend and I had set off to hike an 8-mile loop in sunny, perfect 50°F hiking weather. Right before we left the parking lot, I tossed my poofy down parka back in the car—surely, it was overkill on a day trip. We'd be back in Moab for dinner.

But just a few hours later,

we stood facing each other, alternating uneasy glances at the GPS in his hand and the sage-stubbed cliff walls around us. We'd lost the trail in a sandy wash three-fourths of the way through the loop. After 30 minutes of scouting, squinting at the map, and backtracking, we'd made zero progress. There was no denying it: We were really lost.

It was a predicament I'd always worried about but never experienced. But there I was, off-track in the wild and facing exactly that challenge.

I knew what you're supposed to do: Return to your last known location. Get back on the established trail. Backtrack if you can or, failing that, stay put so you don't make things worse. Under no circumstances should you go

bombing around off-trail.

But now I learned what you *really* do: panic. Even with all that common sense running through my brain, a deeper instinct pulled me forward, not back. *The right path must be close. Just keep moving. Hurry. It'll be fine.* I looked at the darkening sky and could almost feel the snowflakes crystallizing in my cells.

Behind us stretched 6 miles of redrock, some of it ice-slicked and steep and nowhere I'd want to be in the dark. And without a headlamp (of course, neither one of us packed one), turning back seemed like an invitation to disaster. Ahead, somewhere, a trail led a few easy miles back to safety. If only we could find it.

The GPS would save us,

right? Wrong. It could tell us where we were, but not how to get to where we wanted to be. We could see the path we sought on the preloaded map, northeast of the little blue dot marking our location. (We'd been using a simple mapping app as a just-in-case backup, not for careful navigation or recording a track—but now it was all too clear that satellites are no substitute for paying attention.) Could we hike to it through the slickrock maze? The tip of my nose had gone numb by the time we decided to stop looking for our missed junction and just hike cross-country in the trail's general direction. "If we go that way, we should intercept it," my boyfriend said, pointing vaguely into the scrub.

Our plan was to hike in a straight line until we found the trail, but that's easier said than done in canyon country. Side canyons small enough to hide between the topo lines kept cropping up and forcing us off track, twisting me further into disorientation. All the snaking washes behind us looked the same in the twilight, and I realized that we'd passed the point of turning back—even if we wanted to. The fear of being truly lost in that sparkingly cold desert made anything but fevered forward motion impossible. I hadn't been so terrified since a lightning bolt struck out of nowhere just as I'd reached 13,000 feet on a New Mexico summit.

Just as the mood went from bad to worse, we scabbled up a rock wall to find a wide, flat bench. A few more hurried minutes brought us straight to the trail, unmistakable and solid. I practically skipped the last couple of miles to the car, where blasting heat coaxed the blood back into my toes. I would not freeze to death in the desert after all.

Of course, it didn't take long to realize we were probably not in mortal danger from the cold. Temps dropped into the low 20s—uncomfortable, for sure, but the weather was dry, so we would have survived. If we'd been stranded overnight where the trail faded out, we had jumping jacks, pacing in circles, body heat. We would've been fine.

Instead, we walked ourselves straight into real danger. Another side canyon or two in the wrong direction on that draining GPS battery, a sprained ankle or a knocked head from slipping on that rock scramble. . . It was easy to see how hikers get into trouble when they lose the trail. I'd never been lost before, and I was unprepared for the gut-punch of panic it can inspire—how losing my place on the map suddenly distorted the friendly wilderness into something menacing. I wanted out of there so urgently that making a decision I knew was reckless still seemed better than lingering another minute in no-man's land. ■

THE VERDICT

PASS

Sort of. Sure, I made it back. But was I just lucky? Hikers have died of injuries trying to extricate themselves from similar situations. The GPS gave us false confidence that we could navigate the tricky terrain. We should have backtracked along the known trail or even waited until morning if darkness made travel sketchy. But that's easier said than done.

FIND YOUR WAY BACK

Use these key skills to avoid making a bad situation worse.

TAKE A BREAK

Off track? Unless your current location poses immediate danger, stop hiking. Rest and have a snack while you decide what to do next.

ASSESS YOUR SITUATION

Try to recall landmarks you can use to pinpoint your location on a map. Consider your supplies and the skills and resources of group members. Are there imminent hazards, like lack of water or changing weather? If you can backtrack safely, do it. If not, await rescue.

PRIORITIZE SAFETY

If you're confident in backtracking, do it in the daylight and allow plenty of time to find shelter and water before dark. Check your direction of travel often, and mark your path with rocks or sticks in case you lose your way again. Don't wander off-trail hoping it'll "just work out."

DON'T "BEND THE MAP"

Disoriented hikers may fall into the trap of telling themselves their surroundings match what's on their map, even when they don't. Look at the terrain first, then try to find what you're seeing in the topo lines, not the other way around. Likewise, trust your GPS and compass—they're usually right.

HELP RESCUERS

Don't make the job harder for searchers. Stay in the area where you got lost. Leave signs if you must move to stay safe, or if you seek higher ground to signal for help.