

Hiker

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allows hikers to follow themselves on topographic maps. But she left her external Garmin GPS and SPOT satellite messenger at home, figuring it would be a straightforward day.

She reached the trailhead around 8 a.m. and things went well. She hiked through a decent amount of snow, reached the summit and started down ahead of schedule, she said.

That’s when things started to go wrong.

Trapped in Warren Creek gully

After climbing down, Drapiza made her way to Warren Lake around 1 p.m. She headed toward Starvation Ridge Trail, which she was planning to take back to her car.

But in the snow and downed trees, she had trouble locating the trail. She crossed Warren Creek once, then decided to backtrack.

This same spot has gotten many people lost over the years. The area averages one or two rescue operations each year, officials said.

"It's really hard to find the trail in that spot," said Christopher Van Tilburg, a team leader for the Hood River Crag Rats search and rescue team. "If you don't get on the ridge, people often start to follow the fall line downhill and end up in the Warren Creek drainage, which gets very thick, steep and dangerous."

On her second crossing of Warren Creek, Drapiza slipped and fell, dropping down a steep embankment and falling into the creek gully.

"I fell so far that I remember being able to register, 'Wow, I'm really falling,'" she said. "Then I hit something and came to a stop."

The fall injured her ankle. Although she could still walk, she decided against the "nasty, steep and slippery climb" back up. Instead, she followed Warren Creek down, knowing it ultimately reaches Interstate 84.

She found that hiking in the creek numbed the pain of her ankle.

"I came to a waterfall and straddled a tree and slid down it to get to the bottom," she said. "I followed the creek some more until I reached another waterfall with a 40-foot drop and no tree (to slide down)."

At that point, she tried to climb out of the gully and back toward Mount Defiance Trail, grabbing branches strong enough to pull her upward, she said.

"I knew I had to climb about 800 feet southwest to get back to the trail," she said.

But by now, it was almost sunset. The forest was becoming dark.

Drapiza's phone — and mapping app — only worked intermittently. But she was able to send her mom a text "that I was injured and likely needed a rescue," she said.

"I gave her my general location between Warren Creek and Mount Defiance trail."

It was starting to get pitch black. Snow began to fall.

"I knew it was best to just hunker down for the night," she said.

(Story continues below)

A cold night

As night set in, Drapiza found a small tree that provided shelter from the falling snow. She curled into a tight ball and wedged rocks under her feet to keep from sliding down the mountain.

She took stock of her situation. She lacked a shelter or blanket, but was out-



Leslie Drapiza, left, was rescued from a gully in the Columbia River Gorge on Tuesday. She's seen here with friend Frosty Gill. PHOTO COURTESY OF FROSTY GILL

fitted with base layers, a puffy jacket and a waterproof shell and snow pants. She had a first-aid kit, along with extra food and water.

"I felt actually felt pretty confident," she said. "But I knew my family would be worried about how cold I was."

Huddled below the tree, she put her mitten liners inside her puffy jacket to warm and dry them. She wrapped her hands in her hat and tucked them between her belly and legs.

"I zipped my shell up over my mouth to retain the warmth from my exhaled breath," she said. "I kept wiggling my toes to keep the circulation going."

She drifted off to sleep a few times, but as the temperature dropped she woke up shivering.

"I know the stages of hypothermia and kept a careful watch for any signs," she said. "I did doze more than I expected, though, because the night didn't drag on forever."

By this time search and rescue teams had activated and made base camp at Starvation Creek Trailhead. But nobody had much of an idea where she was.

Back into the gully

At daylight, Drapiza decided to continue climbing out of the gully toward Mount Defiance Trail. She crossed boulder fields and had to climb by pulling herself along.

"I rationed a one-day supply of water and food to last another day," she said. "I intermittently turned my phone on to check if I had service. It would only turn on for 30 seconds at a time."

Eventually, she thought she'd reached Mount Defiance Trail "but none of it looked familiar," she said. "I couldn't find the burnt trees that marked one side of the trail."

She considered stopping, and staying put.

"When rescuers are looking for you, it's best not to move but honestly when I stopped the uncontrollable shivering started again," she said. "I had to keep moving to stay warm. I learned later that 80 people were searching, but never once heard any of them. A couple times I thought I heard voices, but I would stop and only hear silence. I figured I was hallucinating."

Much as she hated to do it, she headed back into Warren Creek gully.

"I knew it led back down to I-84 and once I was closer, I had a better chance of being located," she said.

She hiked all day down the gully. Once she could see the road, out in the Gorge, she turned on her phone. There was better service. She called her husband Evan, around 3 p.m.

"I told him I was coming down a gully and could hear a waterfall," she said. "I quickly pulled up the map and realized it was Lancaster Falls."

Amazingly, she'd made her way so far down the gully she was just two miles from the trailhead.

'I thought I might die'

history, and the Silverton project was included as a "safety improvement," said Valerie Greenway, senior project leader with Oregon Department of Transportation.

Increases in gas tax, car registration fees and new taxes on employee payrolls and vehicle sales bolstered the \$5.3 billion package, which is paying for repairs and new construction throughout the state.

"This project was already on our books, but it got pulled forward because of that legislation's money," Greenway said.

Work on the First/Jefferson intersection is set to occur anytime between October and September of next year. ODOT staff members expect the design/engineering – valued at roughly \$125,000 – to occur this fall. That's when Silverton residents will find out exactly what the project will look like.

Residents' message to ODOT has been clear, Greenway said. The consensus is that Silverton wants a bike/pedestrian crossing as soon as possible, with lane configuration changes being of secondary importance.

The enhanced crossing will feature a 10-foot pedestrian island, marked crosswalk, and flashing lights in the middle and on both sides of the intersection. Walkers and bikers will be able to push buttons to activate the lights, and drivers will be directed to stop farther back.

"The island has a raised curb, and the crosswalk goes through the cut of it," Greenway said.

With better service, she tried calling 911 but kept getting disconnected.

So, Drapiza searched for a way around the waterfall, first on one side, then the other.

Then she slipped and fell, dropping down the cliff.

Falling downhill, she aimed her body toward a tree and slammed into it.

"I hit my head, nose and mouth and had a mild straddle injury," she said. "My nose was bleeding but it didn't feel broken and I checked to make sure I had all my teeth."

In pain but still able to think, she spotted a small ledge directly below, big enough to hold two people. She climbed down to it and considered her situation.

Throughout the episode, even while huddled under the tree overnight in the snow, Drapiza never felt as though she was close to dying.

But trapped on that ledge, surrounded by cliffs and with no way to escape, she felt her fate slipping from her control.

"That was the only time I thought I might die," she said. "I'd run out of options. There was no way up or down from the ledge."

Perched on the ledge, she tried calling 911 one more time. It connected.

"I kept my phone warm by tucking it into my puffy and breathing warm air on it between sentences to try to keep it on," she said. "They put me on hold, which drove me crazy because the battery was at like 1 percent, but when they answered they said, 'We've been looking for you.'"

The phone call allowed her to give an exact location.

Between a cliff and a waterfall

Multiple search and rescue teams had been searching the forest since late Sunday night, without much sense of where Drapiza might be. They'd been focusing efforts higher up, just as she'd been traveling down.

Now, they had a location. It was around 5:30 p.m.

"She was only 2 or 3 miles from the trailhead, but it was really, really rugged terrain," Van Tilburg said. "It took us two hours to get a visual on her headlamp."

That was only the beginning.

In the darkness, fog and snow, Van Tilburg said the teams circled her location from above and below, trying to figure out the best way to get in. Plans changed multiple times.

Ultimately, one climber rappelled down onto the ledge with Drapiza.

"He gave me warm apple cider, dry gloves and lots of snacks!" Drapiza said.

"I've never been so happy to see another person in my life."

The Crag Rats and Air Force Squadron created a series of four rope belay stations.

Now in a harness, Drapiza began climbing up, assisted by the rope team. They climbed 400 vertical feet. Once at the top, they belayed back down onto flat ground.

"That felt amazing, just being on the ground," she said. "I was so grateful."

Search and rescue teams brought a litter to wheel her out, but Drapiza was able to hike out under her own power. She declined an emergency room visit.

At 1:35 a.m. on Tuesday — after more than 40 hours outdoors — she reached the Starvation Trailhead and met friends and family.

"First they hugged me," she said. "Then they said I'm grounded and never leaving the house again!"

Reflections

In the days since the rescue, Drapiza reflected on the things that went wrong.

"The truth is that I got complacent," she said. "I've been going out so often that I got comfortable. I should have been better prepared."

She should have brought a shelter and emergency blanket, she said, in addition to her SPOT satellite messenger, external battery charger, paper map and basic compass instead decided of relying on her phone.

As for solo hiking, "many will say it's irresponsible but nothing matches the solitude and joy that the outdoors bring," she said. "I'm happy to know people whose souls also come alive in the mountains and after all this attention maybe I'll find more partners to share the trail with ... or maybe not because who wants to sleep under shrubs, sit on cliff ledges and fall down ravines?"

Drapiza said a special thanks to all the search and rescue teams that helped look for her. That group includes Hood River Crag Rats, the 304th Rescue Squadron, Washington County search and rescue, Pacific Northwest SAR, Multnomah County Search and Rescue and Portland Mountain Rescue.

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