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# When things take a bad turn

*Volunteer team on call to rescue the lost, injured and stranded*

Ron Dungan  
The Arizona Republic  
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A hike unravels and things get out of hand. The sun climbs, water bottles run dry and the trail looks unclear. Or maybe it's winter and rain starts to fall. A shortcut leads nowhere, and now every hill looks the same.

When hikers do not come home, their loved ones call the Sheriff's Department. That call is often passed not to a sheriff or a ranger but to a group of volunteers.

The Central Arizona Mountain Rescue Association takes these calls that come in the night. They have volunteered because as long as people step into the backcountry, there will be a need for a well-trained search and rescue team.

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Operations chief David Bremson has seen his share of rescues over the years.

The team saved 45 lives in 2005. Fifty-eight missions, 18 searches, 2,473 man hours. They find the lost, pulling people out of flooded washes. They rescue the injured from caves and pluck climbers from rocks, though this is rare.

About six years ago, a pair of hikers, a brother and sister out for a quick hike near Seven Springs to celebrate a birthday, failed to return home.

When the search and rescue teams arrived at 9 p.m. it was raining, Bremson said. The rain turned to snow, and by 1 a.m. two teams were in the field, searching the hills of rock and prickly pear. Things did not look good. You could take a few steps, turn around and already your footprints had started to fade, Bremson said.

The hikers were found the next day. The sister had died in her brother's arms about 30 minutes before the helicopter spotted him.

"You train to win," Bremson said. "There is no second place. . . . It was a tough one."

The rescuers do not always win, but your odds are pretty good if they set out to find you. Sometimes they are called on to recover bodies, after the desert has begun to reclaim them, when bugs and creatures that roam the hills have begun to work on the soft tissue.

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## Find out more

The Central Arizona Rescue Association provides technical rescues in Pinal County and other parts of the state. The group is made up of volunteers and relies on the contributions from the community. Details: [www.mcsonline.org](http://www.mcsonline.org)

Arizona's other technical rescue team, the Southern Arizona Rescue Association, covers Tucson, Pima County and southern Arizona. Details: [www.sarci.org](http://www.sarci.org).

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Then there are the water rescues, the ones you see on the television news when someone decides to drive across a wash with water flowing at 5,000 cubic feet per second.

They ignore the roadblocks, ignore the sheriff who warns them not to cross. They have a Hummer. By the time they find out they cannot cross, it is too late.

Already that day, Bremson had dropped from a helicopter to pull a woman out of a wash - he talks about the pilot's skill. You do not learn to lower someone on a rope in pilot school.

Anyway, they are in the hangar when the call comes in about the Hummer. So they go back up and must retrieve seven people, one at a time. When Bremson drops down to pick up the first person, someone has the gall to hand him luggage.

"You see some interesting things out there," he said.

In the wet winter of 2005, the team executed 12 water rescues.

This past winter, a late snowstorm kept them busy. But many of their calls are the result of heat, and they must get to a hiker before the desert does.

"Most of the people we rescue start on a day hike," Bremson said.

Day hikers do not carry a lot of gear. When conditions change, when the wrong turn is taken, they do not have clothes to keep them warm, water to drink, food to eat. Their plan if things go wrong? A cellphone. But cellphones don't always work in the backcountry.

Search and rescue teams train hard, and they train often. While the rest of us drink and plan misadventures, they climb, rappel, crawl through caves and search for whatever their leaders tell them to find. But the training is another story.

It is always a good idea to let someone know where you're going when you leave the house to hike, hunt, fish or sit on a rock in the desert. Because day hikes can turn into much more. Things can deteriorate quickly. It can happen to anyone.

Reach the reporter at [ron.dungan@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:ron.dungan@arizonarepublic.com) or (602) 444-4847.

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