

# Group Walks Case Study – Lake District



## Overview

In early 2009 an incident occurred on a Ramblers walk in the Lake District. Due to the serious nature of the incident and the involvement of three Mountain Rescue Teams, the Ramblers conducted an investigation. This case study provides a brief review of the incident and the associated learning points.

## Details of the incident

A party of walkers from a recently established Ramblers group, taking part in a trip involving an overnight stay set off for the summit of a 3000ft plus mountain. No leader had been appointed. A mountain weather forecast had not been checked. The conditions were challenging; strong winds and mist, accompanied by snow and ice under foot. On reaching the final ridge the group became strung out and some walkers lost sight of each other. Some of the group fell over on the ice and were struggling to stand in the strong wind, so some of them chose to shelter at a cairn on the summit ridge. The rest of the party arrived at the summit and were unaware the others were not joining them. They then left the summit and walked back to the rest of the group sheltering at the cairn.

Unknown to both groups one walker was still making their way to the summit. Having unknowingly walked past the summit group in the mist who were making their way back the lone walker waited at the summit for other members of the party. After some time the lone walker tried to make their way back, but the wind and ice made the going difficult and they became disorientated in the mist. They decided to sit down and wait to be found.

Meanwhile the group at the cairn had become extremely cold and two of the group got into survival bags. Two of the group chose to descend. The rest remained at the cairn for some time but decided that the lone walker must be lost and decided to descend. When they stood up they were blown over in the wind and lost their survival bags. At this point they it was decided to call 999 and request a rescue.

The two walkers who had descended reached their car and phoned the group at the cairn. They were informed that a rescue had been requested and, in addition confirmed that one walker was still lost. They were asked to call the Mountain Rescue Team (MRT) to confirm the situation. Instead, after considerable delay, they drove to the MRT base to clarify the circumstances.

Thanks to the dedication of the MR Service, many hours after the incident unfolded the group at the cairn were rescued. Two walkers were stretched off, one being unconscious with hypothermia. Another MRT with a search and rescue dog found the lone walker. A third MRT was requested to help due to the demanding conditions. Four members required hospital treatment, two remained in hospital overnight.

## Analysis

A number of factors appear to have contributed to the circumstances:

### Experience of walkers

Any mountain undertaken in winter must demand respect and walkers should be suitably equipped to deal with the conditions. It appears that the group did not have the experience or skills to undertake such a walk in winter conditions, heightened by the fact that walk was

taking place hundreds of miles away from 'home', on unfamiliar territory. Navigation and leadership skills are essential and many Groups offer mentoring or training for new leaders. A more experienced group may have chosen a walk more suitable for the conditions and experience of the group – perhaps a low level alternative.

### Weather

If an appropriate forecast had been sought they may have been better prepared for the “*winds gusting above 40mph, whiteout conditions accompanied by severe wind chill, snow showers giving blizzards and near zero visibility at times*” that was forecast. The Mountain Weather Information Service ([www.mwis.org.uk](http://www.mwis.org.uk)) is one provider who offers specific mountain forecasts.

### Equipment

An ice axe and crampons, and knowledge of how to use them, would have been beneficial. Many of the rescuers wore crampons, highlighting the challenging conditions and need for appropriate equipment. Most of the group did not carry survival bags; these are a cheap but effective way of offering protection. Sufficient clothing is essential when walking in winter. That two of the group suffered hypothermia suggests that clothing was insufficient.

### Communication

Lack of communication between the members played an important role in the way the incident unfolded. At no point did the group get together and discuss how individuals felt about the conditions or question if they should continue towards the summit. When it was obvious that one member was missing a plan was not developed about how to handle the emerging situation. The two that descended did not leave any spare clothes or food with the group that remained. Good communication is essential during such an incident and a plan of action is necessary to decide the best way to handle the situation.

### Group splitting up

Had the group stuck together they would not have become separated resulting in one member becoming lost. In poor weather it is even more important that walkers remain together to allow for both communication and to ensure no-one becomes separated.

### Leader decision making

The decision making process was affected by the fact that no leader was appointed. Had there been a leader, responsible for the wellbeing of the group, it is likely that the decision would have been made to go on an alternative walk or to turn back. An experienced leader would not have allowed the group to split up and would have prompted better communication.

### Organisational learning

The investigation highlighted, or re-affirmed, a number of possible actions. These include:

- Walk leader training for remote and challenging walks. Plans are in place to pilot an accredited training course for walk leaders in autumn 2010. The pilot will cover all aspects of leading remote and challenging walks, including leadership and navigation. A consultation will take place in early 2010 to determine the classification of remote and challenging walks.
- The walk leader's checklist now includes first aid and emergency incident information. Over 5,800 checklists have been requested to date.
- As from October 2009, following a consultation with Areas and Groups, any Ramblers walk **must** appoint a leader to be considered approved.

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