

Mountains can be unpredictable, hikers say

By Diana M. Alba

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New Mexico State University graduate student Mike Swink has lived in Las Cruces his whole life and understands how difficult hiking in the Organ Mountains can be.

He said he was once caught on the top of a peak by a storm, which — after a night of cold temperatures — covered the steep terrain in ice. He was able to safely navigate down the mountain, but the incident only highlights the unpredictable nature of hiking, he said.

Swink, who was a Boy Scout for four years growing up, said he takes to heart the scouts' motto: "Be prepared."

He said he usually takes about four day-packing trips and two overnight pack trips in the Organ mountains each month. He carries more water than he thinks he'll need, adequate food and layers of clothing.

"I think some people underestimate the challenge ... or overestimate their abilities," Swink said. "People should be aware," he said, adding most accidents can be traced back to "some error of judgment."

Ben Gabriel, assistant director of intramural sports at New Mexico State University, echoed Swink's comments, saying he thinks inexperienced hikers especially don't realize the dangers of hiking.

"Walking around in Las Cruces is drastically different than walking around in the Organs," he said.

Grady Viramontes, a volunteer on the Organ Mountain Technical Rescue Squad, said inexperienced hikers should go trekking with someone who does have experience.

Viramontes said the Organs are "about as rough as any mountains in North America."

His team specializes in rescues on steep terrain. He said hikers can use a simple rule to tell whether terrain is becoming too rugged. "If you have to use your hands, you probably shouldn't be hiking there."

People also should remember, Viramontes said, that temperatures in the mountains will be lower than in the valley, so warm clothing could be needed. A 75-degree night in Las Cruces could be 40 degrees Fahrenheit on top of a peak, he said.

Wind is another factor people need to be aware of, Viramontes said. Wind speeds in the mountains can double those in the city, as gusts sweeping across the valley hit the western slopes. "The wind can literally blow you off your position," he said.

Gabriel, who has a degree in outdoor adventure recreation from Ohio State University, said thoroughly planning a hike is one of the most important steps a person can take to avoid trouble.

"You want to make sure you're prepared for what kind of environment you're going into," he said, adding hikers should plan their routes using maps and know what the terrain is like. They also should consider the weather they'll be hiking in and plan alternate routes, he said.

Hikers should take a GPS unit and a cell phone, he said. He warned, though, that signals for both can be patchy.

Jimmy Talent, a recreation and cultural resource specialist with the Bureau of Land Management, said hikers should tell other people where they're going and how long they plan to be gone in case they get lost. They should sign in at a visitor's center or place a note on their vehicle windshield with information about their plans so officials will know where to begin a search.

Talent said the Las Cruces field office manages roughly 5.5 million acres of land in six southern New Mexico counties. While much of the southern and eastern parts of the Organs are on the Fort Bliss Military Reservation, the remaining land is managed by the BLM. This land includes about 65 miles of designated trails.

"We have hundreds of thousands of people using BLM lands, and the majority of them stay safe," he said.

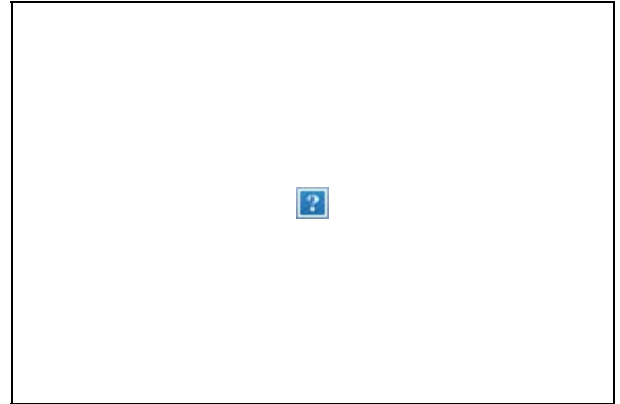
Talent said people can buy BLM maps at the Las Cruces office and get pamphlets with hiking safety tips.

Gabriel, who directs an outdoor program at NMSU, said the university will offer training sessions in the fall that the public can participate in.

These will include bike maintenance and orienteering sessions, he said. Anyone with hiking questions can contact Gabriel or his staff, he said.

Viramontes said people interested in learning more about hiking and climbing can visit a training session with his rescue team.

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A sign, above, warns hikers and climbers of the dangers of entering the area around Dripping Springs and the Organ Mountains. Sun-News photos by Norm Dettlaff