

Lessons learned from an aborted TRT hike



A bothy bag shelter is used to warm someone and get them in dry clothes.
Photo/Provided

By Michelle Foster

I learned three valuable lessons on my Tahoe Rim Trail through hike.

1. Always through-hike with a partner.
2. Field-test my gear before taking it on a multi-day hike.
3. Take the advice of seasoned explorers.

Letti and I were 30 miles into our planned 165-mile through-hike around Lake Tahoe when we found ourselves in a very dangerous situation.

On Oct. 2, we spotted a mountain lion five miles into our hike on the first day. Early in the morning on the second day, very close to our camp spot, we discovered fresh lion tracks. At this point we were 20 miles from our starting point. It may have been a different lion, but my hike became worrisome and I

could not enjoy myself thinking about the lion attacking Letti. Likely, she was his target.

About 29 miles into the hike on the second day, I decided to end the hike the following day. My mind was consumed with the thought of the lion. I was no longer enjoying myself. A mile or so later at around 4pm, I found a great camp spot. It was 10 miles from town in one direction and seven miles the other. An open field close to a cliff with tall trees and flat ground, it was beautiful. The sun was shining. It was warm and windy.

I had cell phone reception at my chosen camp spot, so I called the hotel and changed my reservation. Originally, we were going to be hiking until the 10th. The next day, I planned to hike out to the Big Meadow trailhead seven miles away. From there I would get a ride back to my car. After setting up camp I checked the weather and discovered that thunderstorms and rain were in the forecast from 8pm to 6am. It was close to sunset, and the next possible camp spot was about two miles away. By the time I packed up camp and moved it would be dark.

Mistake No. 1, I decided to stay at my current camp at 9,400 feet.

By 7pm, I was comfy in the hammock and Letti was sleeping underneath.

Mistake No. 2, she started to shiver so I put my down jacket on her. I put her arms through the armholes and zipped it up around her. It fit her really well.

The storm arrived right on schedule. At 8pm the winds picked up and it started snowing, raining and hailing. Hard. At one point during the start of the storm Letti ran off and came back without my jacket. My only other jacket was a thin rain jacket.

One thing I was not aware of is that you need a blanket or

sleeping pad to go between you and the hammock. My sleeping bag was not enough and I was cold (because of the wind whipping under). But, I was able to keep semi-warm.

Mistake No. 3 was using the hammock. My boyfriend, a very experienced outdoorsman, advised against it. In fact, he recommended I bring a tent. I did not listen and decided to go with only the hammock. The hammock is supposed to go over you like a bivy, protecting you from the rain or snow. At about midnight I realized the snow had been getting in the hammock and I was completely submerged in water. By this time the storm had picked up significantly. The wind stung the exposed skin on my face and hands. The sky continued to pelt out an unwelcome mixture of snow and rain. I knew that being cold and wet was not good.

I rolled out of the hammock and found a spot in the snow to lay down. It was so cold. I was soaking wet. I could not stop shivering. I brought Letti in with me, moved around but nothing would keep me warm. I finally let Letti out of the bag because she started to shiver and she was freezing. She got out and started running around playing in the snow. I made the plan to keep moving inside the bag until the sun came up, at which point the storm was supposed to end. I would quickly pack our stuff and hike the seven plus miles out. Until then, I knew I had to keep moving. I moved around inside the bag, did push-ups and planks for the next five hours to keep warm.

The fourth and most important mistake I made was to not take my situation seriously, as the other three mistakes were occurring. I waited so long to do something that by the time I did, I was too weak to do anything about it. I should have taken action immediately. Especially after I got soaking wet at midnight in the middle of the storm.

At 5am on Oct. 4, I was exhausted and still unable to stop the shivering. Every time I tried to leave the shelter of the bag, I would convulse and shiver worse. I thought about hiking out

and knew it was going to be difficult, possibly very dangerous. Another storm was supposed to roll through at 8am. It would take me four hours to hike out, possibly more in the snow. In the condition I was in, I did not think it was safe to hike out soaking wet and exhausted only to get caught in another storm with no shelter. I also knew I could not stay there. It was too cold, exposed to wind and I was beginning to feel very sleepy ... my body was giving up. This scared the crap out of me. So I called for help.

I called 911, and spoke to two different gentlemen on the phone. They asked me about my situation and asked if I needed help. "Yes, please!" Thank goodness I had my Garmin GPS with me. I was able to give 911 my exact location. The GPS had been a handy tool as I was planning the hike. I marked every water source, camp spot and possible exit route, now it was helping to give the rescuers my location.

The sheriff's office told me that the El Dorado Sheriff Search and Rescue would be calling me and to charge my phone if I could. Shortly after Jo, the El Dorado Sheriff Search and Rescue incident commander called me. She told me to get out of my wet bag and walk around and make a fire. I told her I could not make a fire because everything was wet, and I could not leave the shelter of the bag because of how cold I was. All I could do was sit in a huddled position and rock back and forth for heat. Jo told me to eat, drink some water and move inside the bag. She called me a couple of times to check on me and give me updates. It was really awesome knowing help was coming.

The search and rescue team arrived about five hours after first contact. Two women from the team immediately put me into a pop-up shelter and inside a warm, dry sleeping bag.

They helped me take off my wet clothes (I had a difficult time moving my fingers and hands) and put warm clothes on me. They then placed Nalgene bottles filled with hot water inside the

sleeping bag. After I was warmed up, they gave me hot chocolate and a muffin. Those women were awesome. They asked if I could hike down, that they had special access to a route that was about an hour and a half away. Finally warm and knowing the trailhead was close I had the motivation I needed. I knew, I could hike out.

I left the pop-up shelter to find that the other half of the SAR team had packed up my stuff and were prepared to carry it out. The hike out was sloshy, cold, and mostly downhill. My body and feet were very sore, my hands were not cooperating, but I kept moving and talking to the team. Letti really enjoyed the hike out. There was a handsome Shepard search dog that she played with most of the hike out. She did not have to worry about her pack, because they carried it for her.

At the trailhead a sheriff's deputy was waiting to take me to an ambulance.

The paramedics took my vitals and checked my feet. Everything was normal. They asked me if I wanted to go to the doctor and I said no. All I wanted to do was get to my hotel, take a hot shower, eat an entire pizza, and pass out. Spending several hours at a hospital sounded horrible.

I thanked the SAR team, and I got to meet Jo. The search team said she is like the mother of the team. A tough-ass-woman who knows her stuff. She was a light in the darkness on the phone. A great incident commander.

From there, a deputy drove me to my car about a half an hour away. Upon arrival to the Spooner Summit parking lot, I was shocked to discover that my car had been broken into. Thieves busted out my back passenger window and took my purse and overnight bag with all my clean clothes and shower stuff.

The deputy could not file the report because he was from California and my car was parked in Nevada. While waiting for the Nevada police to arrive, the sheriff was kind enough to

share his lunch with me. Refreshing Gatorade and the best pizza I have eaten in my life.

The Nevada policeman took my statement and told me that he wished I had contacted the police department before parking my car at Spooner Summit. He said that two or three car thefts happen in that area a week from people who are out of town and through-hiking on the Tahoe Rim Trail.

After filing the police report, I went to Wal-Mart to buy clean dry clothes, a toothbrush, and duct tape so that I could tape up the window. No places were open to fix the window, so I decided to drive back to Salt Lake City and have it fixed at my dealership.

That night, I slept deeply for over 12 hours in the hotel room. During the eight-hour drive home, I had a lot of time to think about what I had experienced. I cried, laughed, and I was overwhelming thankful to be alive.

I realized the most important thing I did right during my survival experience. Bringing Letti. A smart, athletic, 16 month-old Belgian Malinois, she knew staying in the wet sleeping bag was a bad idea. She fought to get out and run around to stay warm. I tried to force her to stay in the bag with me, but I realized she was getting too cold, which made me realize I could not just lay in the bag. I had to move inside the bag. I worried about her all night. I heard her circling around my bag growling and barking at the night. The thought of her condition and what she was doing kept me from falling asleep when my body wanted to give up. When she heard the SAR team coming her bark echoed through the mountains, alerting the team to my location. Letti saved my life.

I am forever grateful to the El Dorado Sheriff Search and Rescue team for rescuing me, from myself that day.

I am home now. Warm, safe and very happy to be alive. Letti is doing very good – her normal hyper-happy self. She is getting

extra love, snacks and attention from me. She totally deserves it.

I plan to continue my hike around the Tahoe Rim next summer with a trusted hiking partner, field-tested gear, and an extra pair of clothing. But most important, I will be armed with the knowledge and experience needed to recognize when I am in a dangerous situation and to react immediately.