

# Leading walks in remote areas

Routes through remote country or in adverse conditions may present severe challenges for the leader and party members alike. The leader's judgment and decision-making skills may be critical in ensuring the safe return of the party. Additional skills to those required for walking under 'normal' conditions are essential.

Leaders should ensure they have the necessary skills and experience; where appropriate, specialist training may be advisable.

## Reasons for increased risks

Here are some of the factors which may increase the difficulty or potential hazards of walks in remote or demanding terrain:

- Increased complexity of navigation because of lack of distinctive features, confusing terrain and poor visibility
- Distance from safety and lack of escape routes
- Slow progress due to difficult conditions and/or lack of defined paths
- Steep or rocky terrain, perhaps with considerable exposure
- Deteriorating weather conditions
- Loss of daylight
- Inexperienced or fatigued party members

## Route planning

Route selection for this type of walking needs particular care to ensure it is suitable for the ability of the party. The walking time must be calculated carefully using a conservative walking speed and allowing for height gain. Adjust the time for special factors such as those listed above and make a contingency allowance.

Parties may vary considerably in their ability to tackle any given route. Escape routes should be available in case of deteriorating weather or slow progress, and should be as carefully planned as if it were the main route; a low-level route is useful in case of bad weather. Leaders should be under no pressure to stick to the originally planned route in case of poor conditions. Decisions may need to be taken to abandon or shorten the walk, take shelter, adjust the pace, introduce more rest stops, or take any other action that will maintain the safety and enjoyment of the party.

When planning a potentially hazardous outing, an assessment of the risks involved should be carried out as part of the recce. The Health & Safety Executive state that a risk is the chance, high or low, that somebody will be harmed by a hazard. The HSE's five-step procedure is as follows:

- Look for the hazards
- Decide who and how someone might be harmed
- Evaluate the risks and ask are the existing precautions good enough
- Record your findings
- Review your assessment and revise if necessary

Your assessment of risk should continue throughout the walk.

All routes should have a written route plan which lists relevant telephone numbers and critical bearings. A copy should be left with someone who is not on the walk. This should include any alternative routes.

## Competence in navigation

The party leader should have at least two weather protected copies of the relevant map(s), two compasses with romer scales, an accurate watch, fully charged mobile phone and back marker with the same equipment.

The prime skills needed by the leader and the back marker include:

- Map reading abilities
- Choosing a line which you will be able to walk and choosing a line you can navigate whatever the weather conditions, maximising use of linear features
- Setting the map
- Understanding of contours
- Following a bearing, using pacing and timing as a means of measuring distance
- Devising a strategy for taking a safe route off the hill in poor conditions
- Selecting the most appropriate techniques for the particular situation
- Applying all these skills in the worst weather conditions likely to prevail on the planned route

## Party composition

The number of walkers in a party should be at the discretion of the leader who will take into account the terrain, experience of the party (if known), and the probable weather conditions throughout the duration of the walk.

It is desirable that parties should contain a proportion of walkers experienced in this kind of walking so that novices can be properly supported by other party members. In order to limit the party size, and to ensure an adequate level of competence in party members, it is strongly recommended to have a booking system, and to vet the experience of intending party members who are not known to the leader. This could be done by suppressing information given in the programme about the meeting-point and requiring those wishing to participate to contact the leader in advance.

The leader should decide based on known or potential hazards, required fitness, experience and equipment if an attendee is suitable to attend. It may seem harsh to turn people away, but the safety of the other participants and leader may depend upon it.

## Equipment

The leader should take a recently checked first aid kit, emergency shelter, foil blanket. All equipment should be stowed in a completely waterproof inner stuff bag. All members should be advised to carry a first aid kit.

A complete list of recommended equipment can be found here:

[www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer-zone](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer-zone) >volunteer toolkits > walk leader > Leading Remote Walks Resource list

## Winter conditions

Winter conditions intensify the hazards of bad weather. The ground may be covered in snow and ice, landmarks familiar from summer conditions may look quite different or be obscured, high winds may make walking difficult and exhausting, and visibility may deteriorate rapidly. Where snow is present, leaders should be aware of the prevailing avalanche risk through the understanding of published forecasts and personal observation.

Where snow and ice are likely to be encountered, ice axes and crampons will often be needed, and sometimes a rope. All members of the party must bring their own equipment, and must be competent in its use.

## Briefing the party

Brief the party about any risks that might be involved. If weather conditions take a turn, party members should be told to stick together and follow the leader's directions. The leader should encourage participants to express any concerns they may have before setting off.

## Safety during the walk

The leader and back marker should regularly check numbers and keep the party together, particularly in worsening visibility. Both individuals should be aware of how well the party is coping with the demands of the route in terms of fitness and mobility and adjust the walking speed accordingly. There should be regular rests, enabling people to eat and drink, and for the leader to check the general wellbeing of the party and to check with the backmarker about anyone experiencing any difficulty.

In the event of an incident, no person should be left on their own. Leaders should be aware of the different ways of contacting emergency services; mobile phones can be useful but never solely rely on them.

If an incident does occur, complete an Incident form, available at: [www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer) >Insurance and send it to the Delivery team at Ramblers Central Office.

## Further information and resources

Contact the Delivery team on 020 7339 8500 or [volunteersupport@ramblers.zendesk.com](mailto:volunteersupport@ramblers.zendesk.com)

Other sources:

### Websites:

Mountain Training – [www.mltuk.org](http://www.mltuk.org)

The British Mountaineering Council – [www.thebmc.co.uk](http://www.thebmc.co.uk)

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland – [www.mcofs.org.uk](http://www.mcofs.org.uk)

### Literature:

Mountaincraft and Leadership – by Eric Langmuir

### Weather:

Mountain Weather Information Service – [www.mwis.org](http://www.mwis.org)

Met Office – [www.metoffice.gov.uk](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk)