

# Safety on the Hills

We hope these notes will be helpful to all members of Kendal Fellwalkers, and especially to leaders. Some of the points are simply recommendations but others are club rules. The notes provide:

1. Suggestions regarding clothing and equipment for mountain walking.
2. Basic safety guidelines and procedures for dealing with emergencies.

## 1. CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT

1.1 **Clothing.** Hill walking will be both faster and more enjoyable if you carry a light load and are not overdressed. However, there are some items of protective clothing that are essential except in very fine and settled weather. If not being worn, the following should be stowed in your rucksack:

- \* waterproof jacket and overtrousers
- \* warm hat or waterproof cap
- \* fleece or thick pullover
- \* gloves or mitts

1.2 **Footwear.** Strong mountain boots with a deep tread are recommended. Although trainers are habitually worn by some experienced walkers, they are not permitted on club walks in ice and snow.

1.3 **Walking poles.** These have become very popular but they are not yet essential. Use them if you need them – they give support on steep, rough or slippery ground and when crossing streams.

1.4 **Winter gear.** If snow and ice are on the felltops, conditions underfoot can be very challenging and even dangerous. When a club walk goes above the snowline, therefore, you need to be equipped with crampons (or microspikes) and an ice axe. Snow may not be lying on the hills as you set off but conditions can change quite rapidly, so check a mountain weather forecast (see the club website). It is sensible to have winter gear with you if you are in any doubt about needing it. When buying crampons and an ice axe, seek advice from a reliable dealer and/or an experienced club member as to which type will suit the activities you intend to pursue. The club rules stipulate that a leader may refuse to allow members or guests to participate in a walk if they are not suitably equipped for the felltop conditions. This rule applies chiefly to 'A' and 'B' walks in winter. The leaders of 'C' walks are normally expected to plan their routes (and to modify them, if necessary) so as to avoid the need for special gear.

1.5 **Other rucksack contents.** The following should always be taken on full-day outings:

- \* food, including some for emergencies
- \* compass
- \* torch – check batteries and carry spares
- \* whistle
- \* drinks – about a litre (more in summer)
- \* 1:25,000 map, preferably waterproof
- \* compact first aid kit
- \* coins for public telephone

It is also advisable for at least one member of the party to carry a mobile phone (charged and with selected members' numbers stored), a GPS (take spare batteries and don't rely upon it as your sole navigational aid), a full first aid kit (incl. a tick extractor), and a survival shelter (e.g. Terra Nova).

## 2. BASIC SAFETY GUIDELINES

Before looking at detailed recommendations, we need to remind ourselves of some general points:

- o As club members, we have each undertaken to be responsible for our own actions and safety.
- o Our leaders are all experienced fellwalkers, but they have differing levels of skill and few of them have mountain leadership qualifications. While they will do their best to help you they cannot be expected to safeguard you from all hazards and difficulties.
- o The club is a voluntary, non-commercial organisation and as such does not have the same responsibilities to its members as, for example, a holiday company has to its customers.

These considerations make it vital that members should co-operate fully with leaders and try to be helpful to fellow members: responsibility must be shared. The following are important guidelines:

2.1 Don't race ahead – try to stay in visual contact with the leader and the group. If you do find yourself far in front, wait and allow the rest to catch up; in any case pause at staging points such as summits, cols or major path junctions. This is a matter of courtesy as well as of safety.

2.2 If you are leading, aim to keep the group as compact as is practicable. Look out for the slower ones, don't always be at the front, and check at intervals that everyone is still present. Unless the group is small (not more than five or six) you should designate one competent member as the 'back marker'. These points are especially important in bad weather or when darkness is approaching.

2.3 Take care on rocky or icy terrain, where the consequences of a slip are likely to be serious.

2.4 If you see anyone in difficulty or being left behind, do something about it – pass word ahead to the leader, and if you find yourself in the same position, shout! This is much better than letting people become anxious or exhausted, and later perhaps needing help or even rescue.

2.5 Tell the leader (or at least get a message to him or her) if you wish to leave the group or to stop for more than a short time for any reason.

2.6 Have a private word with the leader (for information only) if you have a medical condition that could affect you while out walking. It is up to you to bring any remedies or medication you need.

2.7 A leader should avoid taking relatively inexperienced members into situations in which they may not be capable of making sound judgements about their capabilities.

### 3. EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

If a member of the group goes missing it may be necessary, especially in dangerous or deteriorating conditions, for the leader to form a **search party**. The following procedures are recommended:

3.1 The party should if possible comprise at least four fit members in case the missing person turns out to be injured or immobile and has to be evacuated (see accident procedures below).

3.2 Equipment taken on the search should include: mobile phone; head torches; whistle; GPS; first aid kit; survival shelter; spare clothing; hot drinks and food.

3.3 Since carrying out anything more than a cursory search is likely to take a long time, people not involved in the search should be sent down as a group under a chosen sub-leader, with an agreed route and action plan. If possible a mobile phone should be taken – see 3.5. Some members of the group may be cold, tired or distressed, so the sub-leader must see that they all stay close together; a second missing person is simply not an option.

3.4 Unless there are special circumstances it is not advisable for ordinary walkers to undertake an extensive search in mist or darkness. This should be left to mountain rescue teams, who will have the required skills, special equipment and backup. The leader of the search party will be responsible for deciding whether or not to call out mountain rescue (or put them on alert).

In the event of an **accident** the leader must decide if it is possible to render first aid to the casualty and then help him or her down. This is usually the best course provided it can be done without risking the welfare and safety of the casualty, or of other members of the group. If the risk is judged to be too great, proceed as follows.

3.5 Where mobile phone service is obtainable, ring 112 or 999 and ask for Police; only when you are put through to them ask for Mountain Rescue. Report the facts and give your grid reference. Some people must stay with the casualty to keep him or her warm and give any treatment that is advisable while the rest go down (see 3.3). Remember that it may take several hours for help to arrive. Note: The above numbers can be used to call emergency services even if your phone has run out of credit. Also, if there is no signal for your network, a mobile phone will try to connect you to the emergency number via any available network.

3.6 If there is no mobile service, at least two people must fetch help. Ensure that there is an agreed plan and that the team note down the grid reference of the incident. They should take a phone and keep trying it in case reception improves. If it does not, they will need coins for a public telephone.

After a serious incident or prolonged delay it may be best for the party to abandon any attempt to reach the intended finishing point and instead simply head for the nearest road and then, if necessary, ring someone likely to be sympathetic – a spouse, partner or friend – for help with transport.

### 4. IN CONCLUSION

Please don't let any of the above put you off going out walking with us, especially if you are new or inexperienced. The vast majority of our outings are enjoyable (even if wet!) and entirely trouble free. In particular, don't be worried by talk of emergencies; serious incidents are very infrequent, and even if one does occur you will never be expected to contribute more than your experience allows. Above all, the message of these notes is: *Try to minimise danger by taking care and thinking ahead, and always be supportive of your leader and your fellow walkers.*

Members who want to improve their general mountain skills may like to consult 'Hill Walking' by Steve Long (MLT UK, 2004).

Last revised July 2010