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Posted January 18, 2007

Pat Durkin column: Personal beacons take search out of rescues

Every time we read of lost souls stranded in cars or huddled in snow caves on Western mountainsides, we shudder to ponder the slow-motion terror they felt as a routine outing or drive spun toward inevitable death when they had no way to summon help.

Most searches, deaths and near-deaths in the outdoors, however, don't draw national media coverage because they end too quickly. Suspense, drama and pathos have no time to build. The tragedies become mere news briefs, the collateral damage of outdoors recreation or winter storms.

Consider the elderly man who suffers a heart attack while walking for help in sub-zero weather after he and his wife get stuck on a remote road near their Northwoods home. Or how about the deer hunter who falls from a tree stand and dies slowly from internal bleeding? Or the snowmobiler who breaks through thin river ice in a deep forest, gets drenched and dies overnight from hypothermia.

Sad stuff, especially since the technology to arrange for our rescue anywhere in the world is affordable. That doesn't necessarily include cellular phones or walkie-talkies. Although these devices can prevent tragedies, they're unreliable. Cell phones fry when wet, their batteries die quickly in sub-freezing temperatures and — like walkie-talkies — they often can't connect with help.

Meanwhile, thousands of boaters, mariners and commercial fishermen have been saved in recent years by triggering a personal locator beacon, or PLB. These devices send emergency signals and the victim's GPS coordinates to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration satellites, which alert the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard then dispatches its rescue units or contacts search-and-rescue units nearer the scene.

Until four years ago, however, PLBs were not legal for use on land. Why? Unlike the Coast Guard's marine authority, we had no overseeing body to coordinate land-based rescues nationwide, so each state had its own emergency operating system for landlubbers.

That changed in July 2003 when NOAA, the Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. Air Force gave the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center national authority for land-based rescues.

Just as importantly, the change gave manufacturers the green light to offer land-based PLBs. We now have access to affordable PLBs, which can set a rescue into motion within 3 minutes of our making an emergency transmission to NOAA satellites.

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The MicroFix, left, and TerraFix, center, personal locator beacons made by ACR Electronics. Special to Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers

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When customers buy a PLB for land or marine use, they register it for free with NOAA, and provide phone numbers and the names of three contact people. When PLB owners get into life-threatening trouble while afield, and exhaust attempts to rescue themselves, they open the device and press two buttons simultaneously to transmit a distress signal. Intentional misuse of a PLB can result in federal prosecution.

The signal is sent to AFRCC, which tells local rescuers the owner's name, their exact location and who to call in attempts to verify the person's whereabouts. Even if a friend or loved one can't verify the victim's location, the rescue proceeds.

The most well-known PLB manufacturer is ACR Electronics in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., www.acrelectronics.com, which makes a compact, 13-ounce device called the TerraFix 406. ACR Electronics also plans to launch a smaller PLB, the MicroFix, by late February. Unlike the TerraFix, the MicroFix doesn't float, but it withstands subzero temperatures and hard impacts, and its lithium battery lasts up to 10 years.

Prices for the MicroFix and TerraFix range from about \$450 to \$650, and can be bought from Amazon, Cabela's, Bass Pro, L.L. Bean and other retailers.

Since the TerraFix 406 hit the market in 2003, more than 150 people in the United States have been saved after triggering their device. If you spend time in remote areas, and you wish to remain as anonymous as those 150 saved souls, you might consider a PLB before buying or upgrading less vital gear.

It's money well-spent on yourself or loved ones, and you'll do everyone a favor by reducing risks and expenses required for large-scale search-and-rescue operations.

Patrick Durkin is a free-lance writer who covers outdoors for the Press-Gazette. E-mail him at patrickdurkin@charter.net







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





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