



# The Mountain Rescue Page

## RMRG Receives Prestigious Wallace Stegner Award

**Drew Hildner**



RMRG members receiving the Wallace Stegner Award. Patty Limerick (center left), Alan and Carol Ann Olson (center right).

Photo: Courtesy of the Center of the American West, by Honey Lindburg

Rocky Mountain Rescue Group has become the first group, rather than individual, to receive the prestigious Wallace Stegner Award from the Center for the American West. The group received the award in the spring for “making a sustained contribution to the cultural identity of the West.”

Author and center director Patty Limerick said they chose RMRG for “demonstrating a proposition that Wallace Stegner would have ratified: Westerners prove their strength by helping each other out.”

This is the first time the award has been given to a group or organization. Until now, the center has given the annual award to prominent individuals who “embody the spirit of the American West,” including such luminaries as American Indian activist and writer Vine Deloria Jr., author John McPhee, CNN founder Ted Turner, Mexican-American author Rudolfo Anaya and author and historian Charles Wilkinson.

At the award event several generations of rescuers, representing 50 years of experience, spoke on a panel about their adventures with the group (see video of event here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qccqi3f6IRO](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qccqi3f6IRO)). Adding interest to the evening, a room full of pagers suddenly sprang to life in the middle of the discussion, dispatching the group to a search in a cacophony of noise and sudden, bemused but purposeful activity. “It disproves the notion that the human spirit doesn’t still soar in the West and that folklore

still exists, and is being made, in the West,” Limerick later said of the event and of what the group does.

Ironically, not too long after presenting the award to our group, Patty herself needed assistance after a hiking mishap in Acadia National Park in Maine. It triggered her observation that “technology is not so advanced that there isn’t room for individuals who have temperaments that are drawn to exertion and sometimes risky situations to help others and improve their outcome. The West isn’t just about rugged individuals, but people working as a team that add up to something bigger and greater.”

Rocky Mountain Rescue Group is grateful for the honor and hopes to continue to earn our community’s respect through teamwork and public service.

Wallace Stegner was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author who wrote extensively about the West, both fiction and nonfiction, including his famous Wilderness Letter, whose prose was so moving that it was appended to the 1964 Wilderness Act. The act designated 9.1 million acres of land as protected wilderness and helped bring about the awareness that the outdoors was as valuable for recreation and individual and national character as it was for exploitation of natural resources.



Photo: Chuck Painter / Stanford News Service Library



## Perspective 1: First Day on the Job

Jordan Wachs



Rescuers on the evacuation, west side of Bear Peak.

Photo: Bill Wright

By 8 Saturday morning, the recovery of a body found at the bottom of a 100-foot cliff during the previous evening's search had already begun. Although Rocky Mountain Rescue Group leaders were still thinking through the sequence of the extraction, many of the lower-level tasks had been reasonably well established. Despite the solemn nature of this mission, it wasn't a bad one on which to break in a new member. Its technical complexity was relatively low and, more importantly, as the victim was up-hauled to the awaiting vehicles on Flagstaff Road, the pace could be kept slow and deliberate – an ideal first mission for me as a new member of the team.

That slow and deliberate atmosphere changed at 8:56 when a page went out for RMR to “respond to the Bear Peak summit for an open, compound fracture”. As the sense of urgency on scene at the Flagstaff call amplified, operations established a small crew to continue work on the recovery. The remaining members, including myself, were released to respond to a mission that would quickly come to highlight the well-honed and wide-ranging skills of many members while displaying the remarkable cohesiveness of RMRG as a team.

Minutes before we were paged, Dave Mackey, an elite trail ultra-runner, was on his typical run to the 8,459-foot summit of Bear Peak. Just below the summit, while descending the back side, Dave slipped on the wet slope and reached out to a large rock to stop his fall. An uncharacteristically heavy monsoon season had loosened many otherwise reliable formations, so when Dave grabbed for the rock, it unseated and he continued over a small cliff, breaking his leg along the way. The 400-pound boulder came to rest on his leg, pinning him to the ground. Although this prevented Dave from falling farther down the mountainside, it added a crushing injury to Dave's increasingly dire situation.

Once passers-by had pried the rock from his leg, it was clear that Dave wasn't going to be able to move to safety. The Good Samaritans formed a human chain to prevent him from falling farther down the loose, treacherous slope and then continued to help as he gave instruction on proper first aid. Mackey, a physician's assistant, provided details of his injury and situation to the 911 dispatcher between waves of crippling pain. Dispatch then relayed that information to the RMR members who had begun to make their way to his location.

The extensive radio traffic leading up to the first RMRG contact with the patient, however, did not prepare rescuers for what they encountered. After more than an hour in position and with severe weather closing in, the members of the human chain were becoming exhausted. As rescuers established site operations command, they had to address two urgent needs at the same time: attend to Mackey's major blood loss and other medical needs, as well as protect the personnel and the bystanders struggling to keep him from tumbling down the mountain.

While rescuers established initial medical care, a team scoured the summit block of Bear Peak for a suitable anchor from which a belay could be set. After settling on a large, secure boulder just a few feet below the literal summit of the mountain, they quickly lowered a rope with which I, in

*“... Upon my arrival I was taken aback by the extent of the injury to Dave's lower leg. I physically shuddered and cringed. ...”*

– Bill Wright

*“As a patient being evacuated off Bear Peak, I felt RMR performed extremely well in managing my open tibial fracture. I've done some technical rescue work as a former guide and have a medical background, and with a firsthand view of my rescue I saw only spot on medical and technical decisions.”*

– Dave Mackey



Rescuers preparing Dave for the evacuation.

Photo: Bill Wright

one of my first official actions as an RMRG member, was able to secure those on the face below from a decidedly nonstandard, but very necessary, hanging belay. The medical team provided Mackey with fluids and pushed drugs through an IV while simultaneously stemming his bleeding and beginning to think about the packaging concerns for a patient with an open lower-leg fracture in such steep terrain.

As members continued to arrive at the scene, now shrouded in dense clouds ahead of approaching thunderstorms, they formed a plan to navigate the steep terrain back to the waiting ambulance. The evacuation began with Dave's litter being lowered from the hanging belay off the very summit of Bear Peak under the growing threat of lightning. Complicating the evacuation was the fact that the only viable path to the waiting ambulance led directly through a section of forest that had suffered a severe fire several years before. Because the otherwise abundant ponderosa pines in Boulder County serve as the primary anchors for scree evacuations, rescuers had to use extreme care and sound judgment in selecting the anchors that would support the high loads of the rescue team and patient in the litter. Having barely left the summit block before the storms started in earnest, we descended the

wet mountainside under the constant threat of lightning, through an unforgiving mix of rain, sleet, and hail.

The precise teamwork and considerable skills of the RMR members combined with the fortitude of an extremely resilient patient to produce the best possible outcome for a situation such as this. Although Dave's road to recovery is far from over, at the time of this publication he has made considerable progress. He has maintained his ties to the trail-running community and even published photos of himself returning to the trail with his family – fixation devices and all.

My first day with RMRG was not over, however. Members returned to Flagstaff Road to work with members of the Alpine Rescue Team, who had arrived in support of our team during the uncertainty of the Bear Peak mission, to finish the recovery that had begun many hours before.

As I reflected upon the events of that day while sitting in traffic on my way home, the stark contrast between the realities of mountain rescue and the rest of my daily life began to sink in. Mountain rescue has proven to be far from what I expected when I began working toward my RMR membership, and I expect it will continue to surprise me for as long as I remain involved.

*"...The RMR group started to arrive and let's get another thing straight. RMR ROCKS!!! Give to this organization. Sing their praises. What more can you say about a group of people that spend their precious free time training for and rescuing people. These are volunteers that work so hard and risk their lives at times to save people they don't know. What higher praise can you give to a person? It's quite an emotional scene when you see a literal army of people marching to the rescue. ..."*

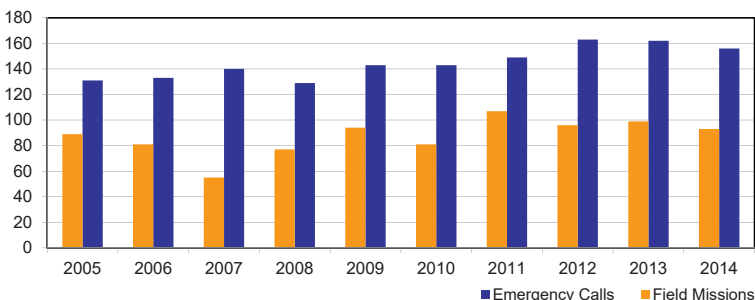
– Bill Wright

## Mission Statistics

Steve Dundorf

Our 2014 mission volume increased the 5-year average again with 156 calls for assistance and 93 field missions.

10 Year Mission Stats



## Help Support Our Mission

**Please consider the  
Rocky Mountain Rescue Group  
in your year-end donations!**

We depend on your generous donations for 30% of our annual operating budget. Without your help, we couldn't be there when needed. Thank you.

[www.RockyMountainRescue.org/fundraising.php](http://www.RockyMountainRescue.org/fundraising.php)





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## Other News

2015 has been a very busy year for RMRG, breaking the 163 mission record!

### Colorado Gives Day 2015!



RMRG is now part of Colorado Gives. Donations made on Colorado Gives Day on December 8 include partial matching funds that will boost your donation. Colorado Gives provides another avenue for one-time or recurring donations in addition to donations through our website, the Combined Federal Campaign, and the Colorado Combined Campaign. You don't have to wait until December 8, sign up now and have your donation post on the 8th.

### Prospective Training Process

Interested in joining our team? Become a prospective member! Our prospective training series is offered once or twice a year depending on need. The training series consists of four full weekend training days. Once complete, prospectives can join the team at our regular Sunday practices and continue the process toward becoming a member of RMRG. For the latest information on prospective training and membership, email [membership@rockymountainrescue.org](mailto:membership@rockymountainrescue.org) or see [www.RockyMountainRescue.org/get\\_involved.php](http://www.RockyMountainRescue.org/get_involved.php). As always, our training meetings are open to the public and are a great way to learn about specific rescue topics and our team.

## In Service

If you would like more information about RMRG, please visit our website at [www.RockyMountainRescue.org](http://www.RockyMountainRescue.org). Also, please consider that we are an all-volunteer organization with no paid positions. About 40% of our yearly budget comes from private donations. RMRG is an IRS 501(c)3 charitable organization, and all contributions to RMRG are tax deductible. We accept donations at our website or by check (made out to Rocky Mountain Rescue Group). Checks can be mailed to:

**Rocky Mountain Rescue Group, Inc.**  
**3720 Walnut St.**  
**Boulder, CO 80301**

## Outdoor Safety: Cell Phones

**Adam Fedor**

How useful are cell phones in the mountains? With preparation, cell phones can be a lifesaver. We will cover three basic topics on using a cell phone in the outdoors:

- Using the cell phone to prepare for a trip and to keep track of important information during a trip.
- Making sure the cell phone has enough battery to be useful, particularly in an emergency.

- Understanding how a cell phone can be useful in an emergency in the mountains.

You can prepare for a trip by downloading apps that might help you in the back country. A basic compass app can let you know which direction you're traveling. A weather app can let you know what will be happening during your hike. Check the weather before you go, when you are sure you have a cell signal. There are also many map applications that will let you download maps of your area (often at no cost), so you can find where you are even without a cell signal. Download the maps before you go and understand the area where you will be traveling. Use the map on the phone to double-check your understanding of the trail you'll be using.

When bringing a cell phone on a trip, make sure the battery is charged before you go out. Watch the battery indicator, particularly if you've taken a lot of pictures with your phone. Make sure to leave at least a little battery charge until you've returned to your car. Consider turning down the brightness of the screen (a major power use) and getting a backup battery to plug in after your main battery is used up.

If you've ever used your phone in the mountains, you'll know that it often doesn't work, particularly if you are in a valley or other low point. So if you do have an emergency and find you can't make a phone call due to lack of signal, two things might help: First, try to find a high point nearby. You don't need to go to the top of a mountain. Being able to see down into a valley with a town, or even just small changes in your position, might be enough. Going back up the trail might seem counterintuitive, but it might be good to try. The other trick is to try text messaging. Often a text message will go through when a phone call won't. Unfortunately, not all 911 centers accept text messages, but you should have a friend who knows you're gone and can stand by to receive messages. Text them and ask them to call 911. Also be sure to provide as much information about where you are and what is wrong.

Most newer cell phones come with a built-in GPS receiver that will automatically detect your location and transmit the information to the dispatcher when you call 911. By making an emergency call, you've probably already transmitted valuable information to rescue personnel. In cases where this doesn't work, or you have sent a text message (which doesn't transmit GPS information automatically), rescue groups have another secret. We can send a special text message to your phone. When you click on the provided link, it will text your phone's location back to us. When calling or texting rescuers, make sure you provide as much information about your location as possible. This can be invaluable in case the GPS doesn't work, or your phone doesn't have a GPS.

Cell phones can be incredibly useful in the mountains – as long as you remember not to rely on this or any other gadget to save you. Be prepared with knowledge and equipment, let others know your plans, have a variety of techniques to deal with any situation, and you'll be well prepared for anything that happens on your hike.



## Perspective 2: When RMRG Wasn't Your First Rescue Team

Page Weil

Cris Benner, Sarah Marshall and Colin Daniell are all members of RMRG who have come from other teams around the U.S. and the world. We asked them what life is like as an RMR member and how things are different here in Boulder, CO.



Cris Benner

### 1. What motivates you to do mountain rescue?

**CB:** I'm a big advocate of volunteerism. Interest in mountain rescue stems from the combination of having a longstanding interest in wilderness medicine and feeling the importance of giving back to the community, doing something bigger than yourself. One of the reasons I moved to Boulder was that it has one of the most active search and rescue teams in the country.

**SM:** I've always felt compelled to help people, and love the intellectual challenge of figuring out technical problems with variable terrain and patient needs. Also, being surrounded by a group of smart, capable volunteers who genuinely care about their community and helping people enjoy the outdoors is very gratifying.

**CD:** Multiple reasons. The big one is giving back to the community. Others include meeting new people, another reason to stay fit, and the look on people faces when you turn up out of the dark to help them.

### 2. What team were you on before and what sort of rescue did they specialize in?

**CB:** I am a former member of Bay Area Mountain Rescue (BAMRU) in the San Francisco Bay area. BAMRU is a Mountain Rescue Association team, like Rocky Mountain Rescue. As an MRA team, BAMRU responds to missing-person requests and to technical rescue situations. The majority of their call-outs are for missing persons both in the San Francisco area and for mutual aid requests (when other teams from California request assistance).

**SM:** I was formerly with Corvallis Mountain Rescue Unit in Oregon. CMRU specializes in high-angle rock, snow and ice rescue on mountains and glaciers, along with wilderness search.



Sarah Marshall

**CD:** I was in several rescue teams in New Zealand. The one I was most involved in was cave rescue. Cave rescue involved very infrequent, often multi-day rescues with lots of technical and logistical challenges to overcome. I was also a member of a Land SAR team and an alpine cliff rescue team.

### 3. RMR is a large team (70+ members). Do you feel like you are still as close with your teammates as you were in your previous group?

**CB:** I feel equally close with my former as my current teammates. When you socialize, train and respond to missions together, you become really close with each other. There is an element of compressed intimacy in many of our call-outs because we see and hear things that many people not involved in search and rescue don't see or hear on a regular basis.

**SM:** My former team has around 25 members, so meeting and getting to know 70+ RMR members was daunting at first (thank goodness members have their names on their helmets). I feel very close to my RMR teammates – possibly because we see each other so often, have a good team culture, and have an especially social group. It is funny how many of the RMR members feel like old friends, even though I have only been in Boulder for a couple of years.



Colin Daniell

**CD:** Cave rescue was a big group who were scattered right across New Zealand. As a group we were only together every three years for a two-day national cave rescue practice or when there was a big rescue. So in comparison I see the RMR team a lot more often.

### 4. What is the best part of doing mountain rescue in Boulder County?

**CB:** It really doesn't get any better than living and rescuing people locally. We have such a great, active population in Boulder County and amazing outdoor resources right in our backyard. I am incredibly fortunate to be a member of a team that consistently steps up to the plate, regardless of weather or time of day.

**SM:** I love that you can have missions in the plains, Eldorado Canyon and alpine areas along the Continental Divide all within the same day or week. The only things I really miss about doing mountain rescue in Oregon (besides working with my Oregon friends) are working around glaciers, massive old-growth trees and stratovolcanoes.

**CD:** The weather and the views. We get called out to some amazing places and not only when the weather is bad. Two a.m., sitting on a small ledge halfway up a Flatiron, with some friends, full moon, helping some stuck scramblers. What else would I be doing?

## Perspective 3: A View from Afar

**Dan Lack**

The Smoke and Mirrors rescue in Eldorado Canyon in 2004 was memorable for many in Rocky Mountain Rescue Group, for many reasons. At that time I had been a prospective member for six months, and this was my first mission. The fresh crunch of my double-kneed Carhartts could still be heard with every stride. Near midnight and halfway up the east slabs to help bring gear off the wall, I found myself answering Jon Horne's question: "Well, what do you think of mountain rescue now?"

In those moments that Jon, Dan, Scott and Ben's LEDs flashed across the rock, images of future nights among cliffs, poison ivy, broken outdoors-folk and friends also flashed through my mind. And today, 11 years later, what I had imagined is replaced with a lot of memories.

I am now half a world away, with my rescue career on hold, my rescue jacket on a hanger in the corner rather than in the back of a Subaru, and I am following a path that only mountain rescue could have put me on. With a little bit of distance and time, it felt right to reflect on what being part of mountain rescue brought to my life.

It has been six months since my last rescue (I managed to sneak in a Second Flatiron pickoff while visiting in April), and surely a healthy mind would let it all go and be happy with 10 years of mountain rescue. Ah, but it isn't quite that easy!

Let's start with the more tangible things that only mountain rescue could provide.

- 1) Spending a night at 12,000 feet half sleeping while your teammates tend to a patient with a head injury.
- 2) Driving down the wrong side of Broadway in a truck with lights flashing and sirens blaring. (Of course, for an Aussie that felt quite normal.)
- 3) Almost the most legitimate excuse to get out of a work meeting.
- 4) Accumulating the use of different modes of mountain transport: ATV, six-wheel ATV, Big John's truck, boat, mountain bike, Blackhawk, Chinook, bulldozer bucket, Dave Booton's truck, snow machine, snowshoes, skis, crampons, light plane, Subaru, someone else's Subaru, the skip, by foot, by taxi.
- 5) Being first on scene to a patient and getting to inform your team by radio that they will be evacuating a 350-pound patient.
- 6) There are about 350 more!

But seriously, here are the most memorable insights on the gifts of mountain rescue.

The U.S. has an ethic of donating time and money to charitable causes like no other country I have spent time in, and donating

time for a good cause provides a great return. But how on this earth has the mountain rescue community kept this a secret for so long? Let's just think about it for a second. You are donating your time to a pursuit that helps a person in need, a distressed family, a community, and allows you to spend time in the mountains, learn valuable technical skills, develop leadership in any environment, and spend hours upon hours



Dan Lack

with people carved from the same chunk of granite. Donating time to training and responding on rescues has to win the award for misrepresentation of a "sacrifice" for the greater good. I have certainly found reward in volunteering since mountain rescue, but it sure is hard work.

The clearest realization of what mountain rescue gave so freely is best shared through my first and last experiences with RMR. In February 2004, I walked into a training lecture on radios. Rich, Scott and a dozen others where blah-blah-blahing, about colors and repeaters and acronyms I had no idea about. That night I shook the hand of Jon, Rich and Ben, nervous that I was an outsider in a very foreign land. Ten years later on a zero-degree December night at Bluebell shelter, I shook the hands of everyone there as friends with whom I had shared thousands of hours, in the weirdest of places and times and circumstances, next to a truck I knew inside and out, hearing RED1 and GREEN and YELLOW traffic that I could actually understand. Somewhere along the trail of Wednesday meetings, Sunday practices, Saturday at 2 p.m. pages and blizzards, fires, floods, rock climbing, mountaineering, biking, etc., I found my tribe.

Another sneaky part of mountain rescue is not so much what it teaches you, but what it teaches you to do. Among the years of practices and missions were hours upon hours of examples set by those with more experience than you. Then one day you're in a barely recognizable environment, at the wrong time of day, without the gear and time you wished you had, and you find yourself with your friends solving a problem you had never even considered, and doing it with relish. Mountain rescue teaches you to solve seemingly impossible problems with a cheeky grin.

And finally, two simple thoughts come to mind: "How on earth did I manage to find something this special?" And, "Where will I find anything like it again?"

## We Never Charge for Rescue

RMRG does not charge for search and rescue under any circumstances. Our position is guided by the experience that people's concerns regarding billing can delay and complicate rescue operations. We are members of the Colorado Search and Rescue Board and the Mountain Rescue Association, both of which also oppose billing for mountain search and rescue services. Other agencies may also be involved in patient services and RMRG cannot control billing practices of these other agencies. For more information please see [www.RockyMountainRescue.org/Charging4Rescue.php](http://www.RockyMountainRescue.org/Charging4Rescue.php).

**Rocky Mountain Rescue is an all-volunteer 501(c)3 nonprofit charitable organization.**

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### Recent quotes

*I wanted to thank you for your professional, efficient, and impressive rescue. I am a Wilderness First Responder myself, and appreciated how well your team communicated when making decisions regarding the care and transport of the patient. It was really amazing how quickly you were able to put him in the litter and belay him down the scree field, all while maintaining scene safety. It was very inspiring to watch you work, and I am grateful for your service to our community. I feel safer knowing that people of such skill are trained and available in emergency situations.*

- Adriane G. (member of the community on scene on the Dave Mackey rescue)

## Newsletter Distribution

We publish this newsletter once per year. If you would like a copy, you can receive an electronic copy by signing up on our website [www.RockyMountainRescue.org/publications.php](http://www.RockyMountainRescue.org/publications.php) or receive a hard copy by emailing Newsletter (at) [RockyMountainRescue.org](http://RockyMountainRescue.org) and include your name and mailing address. Your information is kept confidential and will only be used for the newsletter distribution.



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