

Snowbound Automobile Fatality

Extreme survival tip : Rip your car apart and live

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**The below news release excerpt is from a true story
about a fatality that took place this winter in
Oregon. In part, it reads:**

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"The body of missing CNET editor James Kim has been located, authorities announced Wednesday. Kim's body was transported to the Oregon State Police office in Central Point, Ore., and autopsy results released Thursday determined that Kim died of exposure with hypothermia. The 35-year-old Kim had been missing in the remote southwestern Oregon wilderness for 11 days and was found at approximately noon Wednesday about half a mile from the Rogue River, authorities said. Kim left his family's stranded car Saturday morning searching for help and never returned. Kim apparently traveled in a 10-mile circle and was found less than a mile, separated by a sheer cliff, from where his family's station wagon got stuck in the snow. Officers said there was no way to determine whether he was trying to return to his starting point or if he became disoriented," *[The complete story followed this excerpt]*

The above worst case scenario doesn't happen often, because

... most people won't find themselves in a situation where they are stranded in their automobile caught in a winter blizzard. However some folks who are a somewhat adventurous in their outdoor endeavors, or those who travel to winter ski lodges, or anybody who may decide to take a "shortcut" over a mountain pass during winter months, must take into consideration the possibility of getting stuck in a blizzard and cut off from other travelers.

The best way to avoid the disaster of freezing to death if stranded in a winter storm while in your car is to have your vehicle equipped with an emergency pack of a few blankets, some food, water, flashlights, butane disposable lighters, a cell phone, and a small first aid kit. In such a case it is always best to stay put and wait for rescuers, especially aided by the making of a large smoky signal fire if you happen to be well off the beaten path. But what happens if for any number of reasons a person has to leave the stranded automobile in conditions of several feet of snow with near zero temperatures, and trek miles on foot to secure help? The news article above along with the reminder of three hikers who also recently died in winter storm conditions on Mt. Hood in Oregon should serve to make us aware that "cold can kill" and that hypothermia can terminate even the experienced woodsman.

To gain an even sharper awareness of how subtly deceiving hypothermia can be (where the body temperature drops to a dangerously low point), let's realize that when advanced hypothermia sets in it is accompanied by a state of mental delusion and disorientation. One of the confused mental states caused by hypothermia is a feeling of warmth over the body and the oftentimes illogical action of the person removing clothing and discarding the cold weather protection needed for any chance of remaining alive. (It's probably the body's way of tricking the mind by suggesting "hey, we're done so let's make this a rapid death") Hypothermia can set in quickly, and is no joke. This is why we in the A.R.M.E.D. program absolutely require a person to have a sleeping bag officially rated down to at least 5 degrees above zero in order for them to participate in our winter campouts here in Virginia. Northern state's winters necessitate sleeping bags rated for below zero temperatures.

Your car can be salvaged for makeshift survival items

Ok, you're ten miles from anywhere and snowbound in your car with a few friends or family members. There's two feet of snow on the ground, your vehicle is stuck in a large drift, an emergency situation has arisen, it's been two days with no rescuers in sight, and you have made the decision that you have to walk to find help. However, your clothing is not as it should be for making a dangerous ten mile trek on foot braving the frigid elements. What can you do? The below tips implemented with patience over the course of a day and in a very calculated manner before you head out can make the difference.

- 1) Your vehicle will provide you with what you need to make a hike on foot that will greatly increase your chance of making it out alive. First of all, walking through deep snow is a major chore and will easily deplete you of energy. Even if you are wearing winter boots it's not easy. (It's a nightmare if you happen to have been caught in this situation with only casual shoes). For more efficient walking you're going to have to get "on top" of that snow instead of sinking into it. The two sun visors removed from your car's inside windshield top can be converted into makeshift snowshoes. Rip them out of their swivels hinges. You're going to be insulating them and fastening them to your shoes/boots/feet.
- 2) Before making the snowshoes, let's see how we can insulate the feet and shoes to keep them warm. The warmer and dryer you can keep your feet, the greater the chance of your success in making it to your destination. Your car is loaded with all types of insulation. Find a sharp object with which to cut into your car's seats and seat backs. Remove the trunk flooring padded material as well. If you have to, use extreme care, and break a headlight with a rock, using a large piece of glass to rip open the seats, DO NOT cut yourself and make another emergency on top of what is already a dire emergency situation, Don't break a side or back window or the windshield to obtain a large glass chunk as others will need a wind free shelter while you are gone. Also, the window safety glass won't break into large sharp pieces anyhow.

- 3) Removing and sorting the "inside stuff" of the seats, seat backs, and inside roof (the headliner) is going to expose all sorts of good material that can be used as insulation. You'll find polyfoam, cotton, cushion fibrous material, connective cording, seat belts for strapping, plus vinyl or leather coverings — hardy materials purposely chosen by the manufacturer to hold up to abusive wear and tear.

- 4) Snow shoe construction: Lay out a large square piece of vinyl or leather you have cut from the interior of your car. Fasten several inches of thick insulating material around your shoes/boots high up past the ankle. (Wiring can be taken from engine areas inside the car hood or under the dash if you need it to fasten together anything in this project.) Step onto the center of the sun visor and strap it securely to your feet/shoes. Cut one inch wide strips of material if you don't have enough cord binding for tying. Now step onto the center of the constructed vinyl or leather piece and pull up the material around and over the sun visor covering your shoes/boots. Use your strips of stout materials or cording to wrap and tie the "snowshoes" securely to your lower legs/feet. Try a "test walk" of several yards to make sure they are tight and secure.

- 5) Mitten construction: Mittens are far warmer than gloves. Unless you have thermal winter gloves, make mittens to go over your hands or your thin gloves. You can either just wrap and fasten some insulating material and outer vinyl around your hands, or if you have time you can make a "slip on" square mitten by punching holes in material and "sewing" the sides together with engine wiring. Any way you size it up, mittens keep your hands warmer than do mere pants pockets or even gloves.

- 6) While you're at it, tuck whatever insulating or cushion material is available down your pant legs and around your torso area. After this, depending on what is left, making a large pancho from floor, seat back, or headliner material will work as a wind breaker and a blanket. Just cut a 9" slit in the center of a large piece of material and stick your head through. It should come down to the knees or lower if possible when wearing it. An improvised winter hat which covers the ears will be a necessity as well. Cut materials to fit and stuff it with matting or other fiber cloth.

- 7) Two items you will be taking with you are a floor mat to sit on when resting periodically, thus keeping your rear end dry; and a car side mirror for signaling anyone you may see at a distance. Punch holes in the floor mat edge, tie cord through it for a sling, and throw it over your shoulder. It's easier than carrying it by hand. Knock the side mirror housing off of your car with a rock or large fallen tree branch. If you can remove the mirror from the housing, so much the better. This will be less cumbersome and will fit into a pocket. Or take off the rearview interior mirror — whatever works for you. A reflected sunlight signal from a mirror can be seen 50 miles away by an aircraft that is looking for you. Don't leave the mirror behind. A third optional item, but one worth mentioning, is taking a wheel hub cap with you if available (sling it too). This may be necessary if you know that you are in bear country and if it is early in the season the bears may not

yet be "denned up" for winter. By beating the hub cap with a stick occasionally you will be making enough noise to alert any bears in the area. Almost always they will stroll away if they know a human is coming. If you happen to be up wind of a bear that can't smell you, and you accidentally sneak up on it around a concealed bend, the startled bear will be many times more dangerous than one who has heard you coming a hundred yards away. Also, a hunter or a woodland recreation cabin may be just over a hill you pass, so making a noise heard at a distance could just be the ticket home.

- 8) Snow goggles: You're going to need these if you didn't bring your alpine survival skiing sun glasses. After a substantial snowstorm, the next days will more than likely bring a sunny day. The reflective glare of bright sunlight from the snow can blind a person who is out in it for a length of time. The time varies with conditions, but limiting visual exposure to this problem is essential. Snow sun goggles can be made by making a bandana to place over your eyes and tying it behind the head. Small slits for eye holes should be made that are just big enough to see comfortably ahead of you but not large enough to expose the light glare to the eyes. Lifting the bandana style goggles every 100 yards or so to view the surroundings is the general method of progress you'll want to engage while hiking. Dirty black grease from the car engine area rubbed over your nose and high cheeks below the eyes also reduce sun glare.

- 9) Obviously, take what food and/or matches, lighters, that can be spared from the group back at the snowbound car. Hopefully you can make a fire from prior experience. If you're not adept at this skill review some of the fire making sections in your team manual. A snowstorm means that most downed wood will be wet and difficult to kindle. Choose very small dead branch ends or dried dead pine needles ON a tree for tinder and start with small twigs for the main firewood. Dead wood low on a standing tree trunk will be a lot drier than downed wood from the ground in the snow. Better yet, take some paper from the glove-box documents for starting a fire. If you're doing this effort without food --- it's even so much more important that you carefully think out ALL the previous steps before starting out. You will be taxing your body to the limit without food, but if you stay dry and warm enough to avoid frostbite, moving along at a relatively comfortable pace without racing in a panic, you will be good to go for several days and may be able to cover as much as 20 miles considering that all things go well. Chances are good that you will have contacted help by then. If you will not have the ability to make a fire, search out wind free areas or pine tree areas for resting and sleeping. Kick together as many dead pine needles on the ground as possible and lay small fresh branches on top for bedding. Rest on these and cover yourself with your pancho. Remember, if you're near a creek the water temperature will be at least 32 degrees. A pine tree bed close to a creek will suffice for warmer air if the temperature is dropping to zero, as long as you don't fall in the water. In a large rock area, the rocks forming a wind free shelter will also be holding a little heat from the daylight sun. It's also an alternative sleeping spot.

- 10) A word about drinking some water. You'll need to do it. The body can go weeks without food but only a few days without water. The scenario under discussion is a little tricky however since some experts advise on not

ever drinking unboiled creek water, or eating snow since it can lower the body temperature. But we're in an extreme situation here where you are gambling on finding help in a day or two, maybe three. What to do? If you come across a creek — go ahead and slowly drink the water as is. You won't have time nor equipment to boil it. The nasty "bugs" (giardia, cryptosporidium, microbes), if any, won't take a toll on your body, as far as symptoms, for a few days or even a week. By that time you will either be dead from exposure and hypothermia, or you will have found help. If you make it to civilization and have come down with a bad case of diarrhea and stomach cramps from drinking creek water they will just haul you off to an ER and pump you full of meds to kill the little intestinal intruders for a fast recovery. Either way, dead or alive in the end, drinking the creek water in this short term situation is not a major crisis. Just go slow with sipping the water and warm it up in your mouth before swallowing. The same goes for snow or ice. Some winter survival articles warn against eating snow because it lowers the body temperature. True --- if you have the option of melting the snow over fire it's best; but not getting ANY H₂O intake will play worse games with your entire metabolism, and weakness will set in quickly. It's a survival balancing act for sure. If all you have access to is snow or ice, melt it in your mouth in very small quantities to warm it before swallowing. It's when snow, ice, or ice water goes to the stomach quickly, that the danger of a body temperature drop is accentuated. In any case, try carefully to know your own body to see if you are tolerating the H₂O temperature intake as safely as possible.

- 11) When you finally decide to head out on foot --- **STAY ON THE ROAD**. If you have a cell phone that was out of range for a call, just a few miles difference in a change of direction may bring you back in to the calling area. Search parties will be tracking you down on the roads first. If highways have been blocked, a few days of work by the snow removal crews will be getting rescue vehicles closer to your area. Have hope that people are looking for you, because they will be. If you wander into the forest you are working against the rescue teams trying to make a visual contact with you and exposing yourself to many more dangers than trying to walk the road until you find help. You may even want to print out this lesson and store it in your auto's glove-box, just in case.