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At White Mountains trailheads, volunteers work to save lives

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Monitor staff

Thursday, April 06, 2017

The U.S. Forest Service is redoubling its efforts in the White Mountains to ward off search and rescue missions before they happen with the help of volunteers.

At trailheads where the data show inexperienced hikers making dangerous decisions – setting off into rugged terrain with sometimes nothing more than the flip-flops on their feet – the forest service has stationed its “trailhead stewards,” who make contact with as many as 650 people in a four-hour shift.

These volunteers use their brief interactions with hikers to make potentially life-saving recommendations: for instance, carry a map and flashlight, or take the slippery trail on the way up instead of down.

Roughly 15 percent of the 33,400 hikers who conversed with trailhead stewards last year appeared unprepared, according to the stewards’ judgments. About 75 percent of those hikers changed their plans in some way after interacting with the volunteers, they noted.

“We have a pretty big impact on those that are unprepared,” said John Marunowski, a wilderness manager for the forest service who developed the trailhead steward program four years ago. “We’re able to change their plans or course of action. Maybe they went on a different hike or went to their car for more clothes or food.”

The Fish and Game Department engages in more than 70 rescues a year within the bounds of the national forest, according to its records, costing roughly \$150,000 and proving that the famously fickle weather and slow going in the White Mountains still catches hikers by surprise.

But forest service volunteers have made some good from those trying episodes. By studying Fish and Game's rescue data, they've tailored the trailhead steward program accordingly for the upcoming year.

"Anything we can do to educate people, to save lives, to have a good outcome – that's a good way to do business," said Col. Kevin Jordan, the top law enforcement officer for the Fish and Game Department. "It undoubtedly saves lives and saves money."

Digging into data

One thing the forest service found during its review of hundreds of search and rescue cases since 2012 was that its trailhead steward program has been targeting the right locations.

Five of the state's most popular trailheads – Champney Falls, Appalachia, Ammonoosuc Ravine, Welch-Dickey and Old Bridle Path – accounted for many of the injuries, accidents and other rescues.

Those trailheads have been regularly staffed as part of the trailhead steward program from 8 a.m. to noon from late May to October. This year, they'll see additional shifts later on in the day to prevent late-arriving hikers from getting stuck after sundown, Marunowski said.

Christy Brodeur, a Plymouth State College student and forest service intern who analyzed the data, said 53 percent of rescues were prompted by an injury.

"Some of those injuries are entirely unavoidable, where they have anaphylactic reaction or went into cardiac arrest. And then there are the cases when someone slipped going down the mountain because they weren't wearing boots," she said.

Another category of rescue is when people are overcome by darkness and they lose the trail without a map or a light, she said.

"Those two factors are the big reasons why search and rescues are happening that could be avoided," she said. "The trailhead steward program is working to encourage hikers to bring those things with them, so it'll lessen the load for conservation officers."

She added: "They're going out four or five times on a single day sometimes to the same trail at night."

The 4.1-mile Welch-Dickey loop trail off Route 49 in Thornton was one location that accounted for 15 searches and rescues last year, she said. Brodeur noted that it's recommended to go up the slabby – and therefore slippery – Welch trail and down the Dickey trail.

Of the rescues, she said, "90 percent were people who slipped going down Welch."

That's the sort of recommendation trailhead stewards are likely to make, Marunowski said, noting that "it's been really cool that people are receptive and generally friendly and willing to take our advice."

"Beginners especially tend to be unprepared and don't do a lot of homework, but when they see somebody in uniform or someone with a little more knowledge than they have, they're happy to listen," he said.

Going forward

One of the most dedicated trailhead stewards is Bill Tarkulich, who along with other volunteers has poured more than 400 hours of work into refining the program since the fall. He's been working as a steward for three years and last week went on a "road show" to build awareness about the program with public meetings.

Tarkulich, who is semi-retired and has a background in marketing, said the result has been that he expects "well over 100" people to show up to the one-time training this Saturday.

That's far different from when Marunowski started the program in response to the increased visitation and decreased staffing in the forest, he said.

"My vision all along was to staff some of our busiest trailheads at the most appropriate times in order to talk to those who are unprepared," he said. "It's been really cool, because just a couple years back I was sitting in a training room with 12 other people."

Anyone is welcome to show up at 8 a.m. at the White Mountain National Forest headquarters in Campton, 71 White Mountain Drive, for the training, he said. More information can be found at volunteer.gov.

Potential volunteers are encouraged to check out the program and decide whether they'd like to participate.

After the training, Tarkulich is hoping the program will be fully staffed and prepared to have a uniformed presence at the most popular trailheads this summer – including later hours until 4 p.m. – with volunteers doing what they can to prevent costly and dangerous rescues.

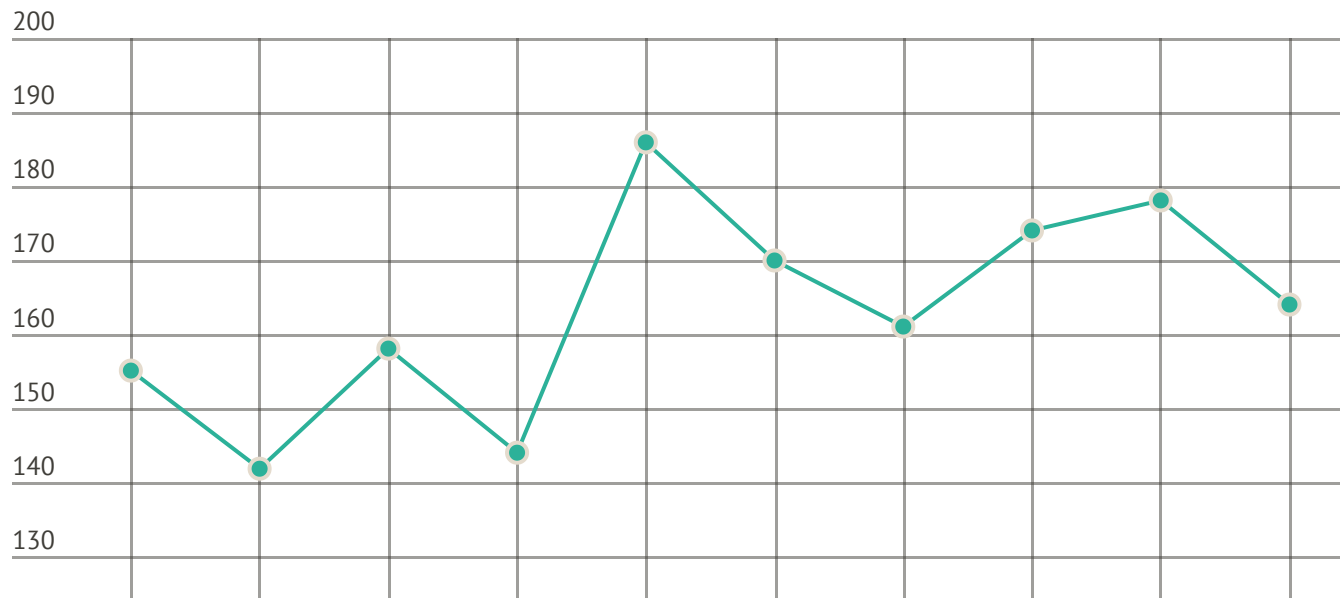
“We’ve all complained all our lives about these negligent search and rescues,” he said, “and here’s a program that’s actually doing something about it.”

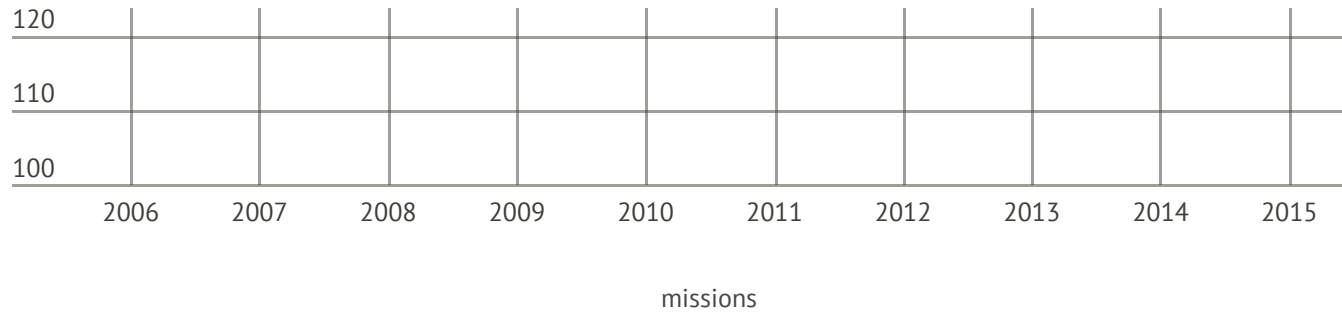
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FISH AND GAME SEARCH & RESCUE

Number of missions each year

In New Hampshire, the Fish and Game Department is called to perform search and rescue missions. These include hikers, climbers, hunters, anglers, boaters, ATV riders, cross-country skiers, swimmers and runaways. The data below represents the whole state. About 45 percent of all cases are located within the White Mountain National Forest.





1,632

Number of Fish and Game rescues between 2006 and 2015

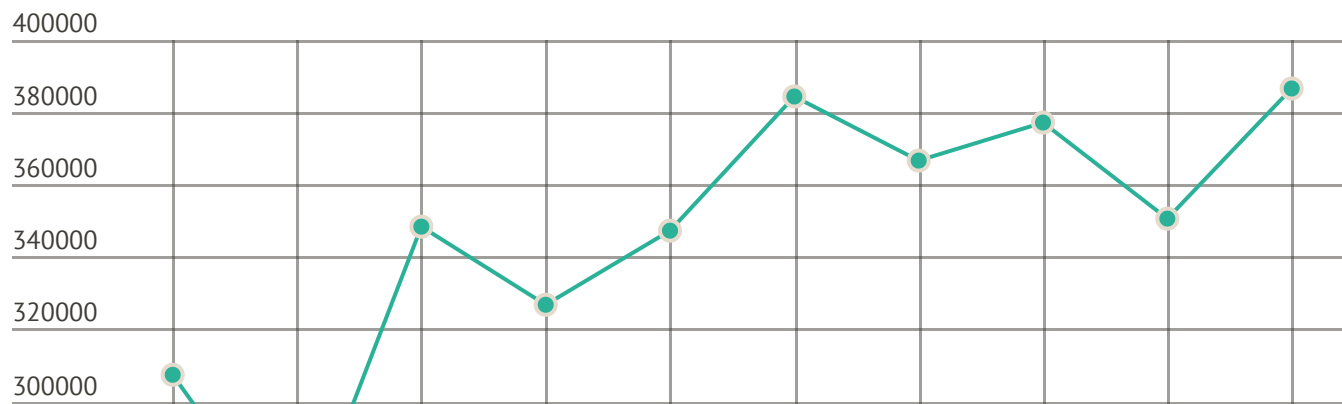


\$3,456,408

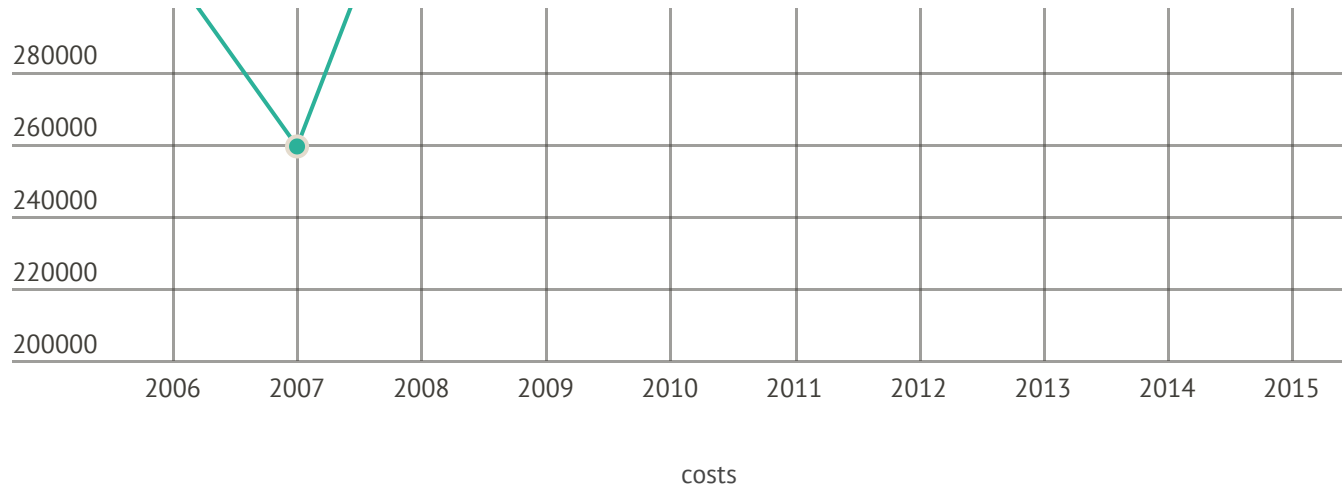
Cost of those missions

Costs are on the rise

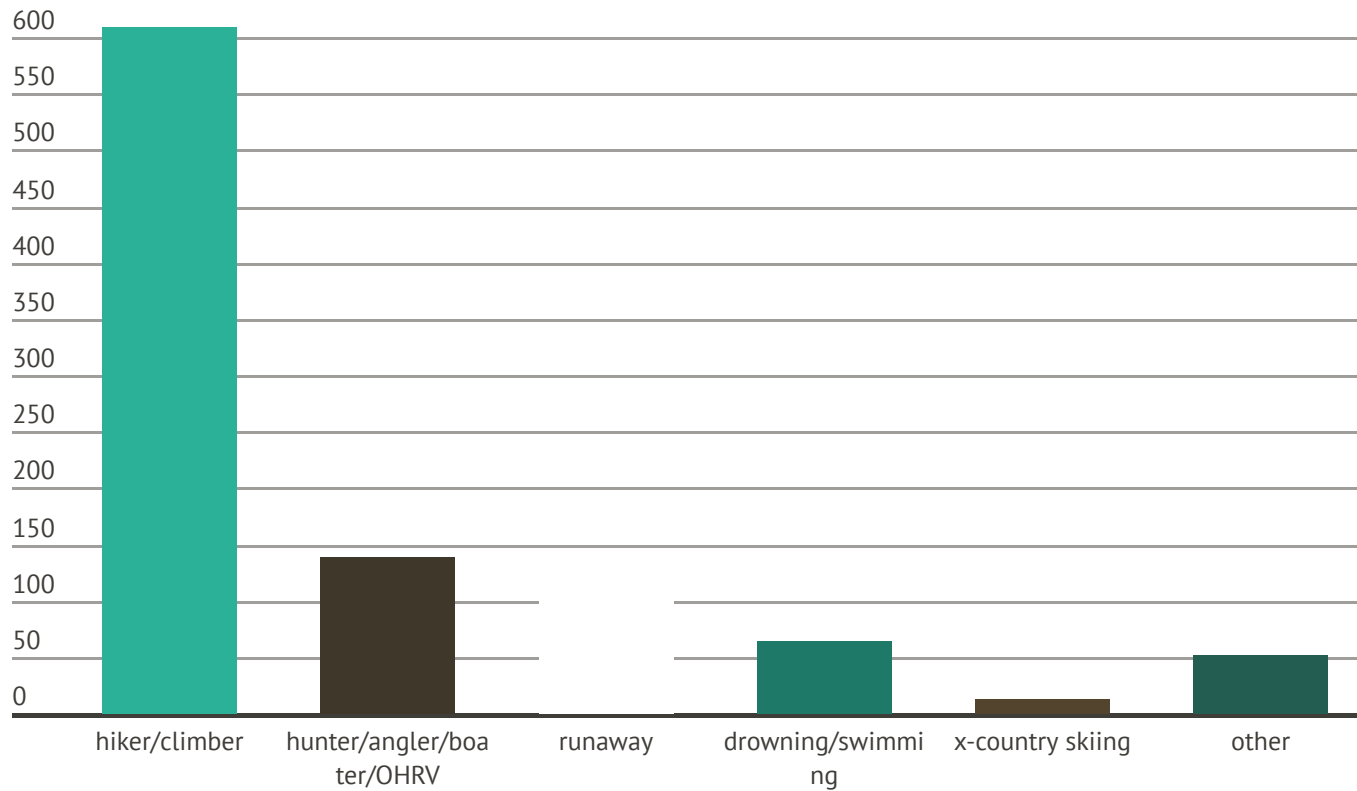
The most recent year for which data was available, 2015, represented the most costly year in the past decade. In cases when the person who is rescued is deemed to have been reckless, they can be sent the bill for the cost of the mission. But on average, only about 6 percent of all rescues are billed.



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Breakdown of types of rescues



Trailhead steward program

A volunteer program organized by the U.S. Forest Service seeks to ward off search and rescue missions before they happen through quick conversations with hikers at trailheads.



33,401

Hikers who conversed with trailhead stewards last year



85%

Hikers who seemed prepared



15%

Hikers who seemed unprepared



75%

Of the unprepared hikers, percentage that changed their plans in some way after speaking with trailhead stewards

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