

## Dangers and Safety



No, I don't agree with this common statement

Even more fun than running 100-mile races for me is doing solo adventure runs. My first long solo adventure run was in 2002, to Kings Peak in Utah. Over the years I gained more and more experience and learned how to run with minimal weight on my back, but enough food and emergency items to keep me out of trouble. I've now run thousands of miles solo in the back country in Utah and Arizona. I'll routinely do runs of 50K to 50 miles and at times up to 100 miles.

I've been criticized for going out alone for such long distances. But those who know me understand that I'm actually very conservative as it comes to safety.

One year a local road runner who experienced the Grand Canyon for the first time was so excited about the experience that he scheduled a large group run for a Grand Canyon R2R2R in the heat of June, inviting anyone interested, including people he never had met before. Dozens of first-time Grand Canyon runners expressed interest. I was very vocal about how dangerous this was at that time of the year and how improper it was to organize group runs with strangers into dangerous areas. I had read and followed very closely all the canyon rescues and deaths from heat exposure. That runner and his friends slammed me on social media. Eventually someone informed the NPS authorities. Thankfully this large event never took place and soon the NPS started to require permits for these type of group runs.

The vast majority of my runs involve routes and trails where I know, where I can run into people, so I'm rarely really alone. I know my limits and take what I think are reasonable precautions. On certain runs I'll take a rented satellite phone or a SPOT tracker. Other things are taken like signal devices, fire starters, and emergency blankets.

Why solo? First it is tough to find someone who can go as far as I like and keep up. Second, in my mind with each person added to the adventure, increases the odds that a problem will happen. I'm confident in my abilities and know that I can get myself out of most trouble. I do not know for sure the abilities of others and if they can't really do it, the adventure turns into a worrisome rescue operation. My biggest fear while running solo is an accident/fall which would leave me unable to walk out. But so far with thousands of adventure miles, things have worked out.

Precautions have to be made. I always inform others exactly where I am headed and when I plan to finish. If you announce an adventure publically, please make sure those who read about it, know that you have everything taken care of. In 2013, a new friend announced a solo Uinta Highline Trail end-to-end run in potentially very bad weather and he let us follow online via his SPOT tracker. When terrible weather came in, the help button was pushed on his SPOT and none of us knew that this was actually a signal to his friend that he was bailing out to a pre-defined escape route. Those of us following were about to jump in our cars to the rescue and I stayed up almost all night worrying. I felt some responsibility because I had published my Highline Trail runs which have inspired others to also attempt it. All turned out OK, but the lesson learned was that we should not cause stress and worry on those at home. If we are clear with our plans and possible contingency plans, worry will be less and the right actions can be taken at the right time.

## My Path to Ultrarunning – Davy Crockett

Tragically in 2016, this same person, taking on even more risks, was killed by an avalanche while skiing alone in the back country. Runners in social media wanted to honor his memory by organizing an end-to-end Highline Trail run in the Uintas in his memory. Such a run would be dangerous for those who weren't prepared for a rugged, long run of that distance. I spoke out against this. They just didn't get it. This tragedy didn't have to happen. Safety lessons needed to be learned. Why honor the memory of a fallen runner by seeking dangers and risks for yourself? Instead honor his memory by promoting safety. Thankfully instead, later in the summer local runners constructed a memorial in the location where he was killed.

Starting in about 2013 a different breed of runner started to appear more and more on local Utah social media. These runners loved to run on dangerous ridges and many would post eye-popping dangerous photos on the Internet showing themselves in very risky situations. Others would post leaping pictures on dangerous summits. Some of these runners were well trained in mountaineering and I didn't worry about them, but others were not. These actions bothered me deeply because you could see the youthful comments in reaction to these photos and videos, calling them "cool." You would see responses such as "Let's do!" This practice continued into the winter. Certain runners would even dare each other so see how long in the winter they could run up into the mountains with shorts and without warm clothes. Then dangerous summit quests extended into the winter, not a problem with well-prepared experienced mountaineers, but many runners were not.

Perhaps unrelated, more people seemed to fall off high ridges and peaks and die in Utah. An ultrarunner who was signed up for Squaw Peak 50 fell off Mount Olympus in icy conditions. A fairly experienced hiker fell off a dangerous Mount Nebo ridge. A rookie hiker fell off Lone Peak taking the wrong route.

By 2016 Utah runners increasingly were drawn to attempting traversing very long and pretty dangerous ridge lines in the Wasatch Mountains without any climbing gear and through the night. One such route coined as the Wasatch Ultimate Ridge Linkup (WURL) involves circumnavigating Little Cottonwood Canyon across 36 miles of rugged ridges. Runners without proper training and skills were drawn to do this dangerous adventure and I would cringe each time I heard people were attempting it. In August 2016 an experienced woman, Celeste Yang aborted a WURL attempt and just a few days later fell to her death on a dangerous ridge near Mount Olympus. She was with your boyfriend but they were not using any safety gear. On social media I was sad to see comments such as, "at least she died doing something she loved," and very little comments encouraging runners to use climbing gear across dangerous areas. One runner mocked the idea of going for a trail run taking a rope.

All this really bothered me and boastful dangerous pictures and videos continued to be posted on local social media running groups. One year a small local group of guys created a film and successfully were signed up for a series on a national cable TV network. The pilot episode showed these guys scaling dangerous ridges unroped and arguing over pushing limits. Most locals applauded these guys, but I felt serious distaste. While other reality adventure shows on TV emphasized safety, this one only glorified risk-taking. Thankfully the series was quickly canceled after just three episodes.

I eventually spoke out about the practice of posing purposeful risky photos but of course got slammed. But I didn't back down. Why post these photos and videos which indirectly encourage untrained kids to also seek these dangers? Safety was almost never mentioned with these photos. Roping up was never considered and even sometimes mocked in comments. One person expressed the view that we should never feel guilty if someone dies after trying to mimic our adventures. I totally disagree. We have a responsibility to point out the dangers and to promote safety. We should not glorify taking risks without safety precautions.

For winter events, needed equipment is rarely mentioned. More and more I felt distanced from this local running group. It seemed to be more about doing silly and risky antics in the mountains than respecting and enjoying nature. The local group held an annual dinner and I invited my wife to come with me. A video was shown at the event, mostly of silly antics on ridges and summits and winter quests. It all felt very uncomfortable, wasn't about the running I loved, and we left early. On social media, when a well-respected ultrarunner asked for a greater respect for the mountains, asking that these runners stop leaving items and messages to each other on summits, he was also slammed and mocked by some. I totally agreed with him. I concluded that I was just a different breed of runner and probably part of an older generation. I believe the summits should be treated with great respect. The Native Americans have reverent feelings for many of these summits. These summits make me feel close to God. I don't share the joy to act silly on them and take risks on them. So I started to run even more by myself instead of seeking to be run with this group.

To run solo, you need some good outdoor survival skills such as the ability to find water, start a fire, build a shelter, seek for food, read a map, and know directions by the sun and stars. Getting lost is way down on my list of worries because of careful preparation before the adventure. You need to stay on trails and routes, avoid short-cuts, and understand the dangers of getting rim rocked (stuck on ledges). You need be able to detect early both the symptoms of hypothermia and dehydration. If running at night, you need the right lighting systems and backups including batteries. You need great foot-care experience and bring with you items to repair your feet. You need solid first aid skills and some sort of kit. Without this experience and items I would never attempt these kinds of adventures.



Common sense tells me to avoid solo runs in extreme conditions. I avoid heat, such as the Grand Canyon mid-May on. I avoid running in severe cold. I avoid running alone in the back country with snow avalanche danger. I avoid runs that require dangerous climbs. I'm not skilled in climbing and even if I were, I wouldn't do that alone. If my route comes upon situations where I need to use my hands to climb up or down, I stop and question whether I should continue. I back off, even if I believe I can do it without problem. Why take the risk? I can always find a different, safer route. I won't go into caves or mines or other such dangerous situations. I won't run slot canyons if there are storm in the forecast. So no, I would never do the kinds of climbs and runs attempted by Aron Ralston who became trapped in a slot canyon when a boulder felt on his arm. If I enter an area that looks dangerous, I'm not timid in turning around and going back. To me, those are just extra miles, no problem. Many people keep going because they dread going back because it seems hard. Not me.



So I hope as one reads about my adventures and if they are tempted to copy, that they have enough experience and are taking the right precautions.

- [Hiker dead of apparent fall from cliffside near Alta](#)
- [Hiker dies from fall near Lisa Falls](#)
- [Experienced hiker missing in Utah mountains found dead](#)

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- [Body of missing skier found buried in avalanche](#)
- [Tooele man dies after falling on Mt Nebo](#)
- [Hiker falls to her death on Utah's Mount Olympus](#)
- [Hurricane teen dead after falling off 200 ft. cliff](#)
- [Hiker dies in 100-foot fall at Zion National Park](#)
- [Missing hiker found dead in Little Cottonwood Canyon](#)
- [Woman fell after hiking most dangerous area of Bridal Veil Falls](#)
- [Couple killed by lightning while hiking Lone Peak](#)
- [Fallen hiker hoisted from canyon in busy year for rescues](#)
- [Hiker found dead after fall from Mount Olympus](#)