

GPS device speeds rescue of seriously injured Columbus hunter



Columbus elk hunter John Chepulis holds a SPOT Satellite GPS Messenger in a photo taken for his wife, who urged him to buy the device. It later proved useful in sending an SOS when Chepulis was bucked off his horse and badly injured.

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It seems wrong to say that Columbus elk hunter John Chepulis was lucky. He's lying in a Bozeman hospital intensive care room hooked up to a ventilator to help him breathe, heavily sedated and fighting pneumonia. But his situation could have been much worse.

"This whole thing, to me, has been divine intervention from the beginning," said Bonnie Chepulis, John's wife.

Chepulis, 65, was hunting with friends John Simmons and Scott Wittman near the base of Shedhorn Mountain southeast of Ennis on Oct. 30 when everything went haywire at about 10 a.m.

Chepulis and Wittman were about three-quarters of a mile across the canyon from Simmons, riding their horses across a forested slope as Simmons occasionally watched them through his binoculars.

"They were supposed to get a couple of elk and chase them to me," Simmons said.

As Simmons periodically scanned the terrain around him and then went back to check on his friends' progress, he saw something unusual.

"I just happened to look up and here comes an elk out of the bush and right behind it is John's horse with no John," Simmons said.

Then he saw Wittman riding hell bent to catch the runaway horse.

As Wittman and Chepulis were riding along, Chepulis' horse spooked at the scent of a grizzly bear track where it had crossed the snowy trail. When the horse spooked, an elk that had been bedded down next to the trail bolted from the trees, further alarming Chepulis' horse, which took off at a full tilt. As the horse fled, Chepulis fell off and landed on a rock slide.

In the fall, Chepulis broke 10 of the 12 ribs on his right side, some of them in several places as he bounced from his back to his chest. One of the bones punctured a lung that then collapsed. So many broken ribs in a row created a life-threatening medical condition called a flail chest. That's when a segment of the rib cage is detached from the chest wall. Normally when a person breathes in the chest expands, but with flail chest the detached segment moves inward, complicating breathing and increasing pain. Chepulis was also suffering from what's called tension pneumothorax, or air in the chest cavity, which can be fatal when it reduces the heart's output.

"He's kind of a mess," Bonnie said. "Right now he's so sedated that he can't communicate with us."

He remained conscious after the accident, though, and talked to his friend. Seeing his hunting partner badly injured, Wittman used a walkie-talkie to call Simmons for advice.

"John just took a real bad fall," Simmons said Wittman told him. "What do you think about turning this SPOT thing on?"

Satellite help

SPOT Satellite GPS Messengers are palm-sized electronic devices that allow users to notify their family back home where they are via the company's website. The user can also send messages that they are OK, send a specially pre-written message, call for help in a non-life-threatening incident or to send an SOS in a dire situation.

Chepulis' and Simmons' wives had made their husbands purchase the devices only days earlier, after they had returned home "30 hours late" from taking part of their camp in the previous week in active grizzly bear country, Marilyn Simmons said. Bonnie said she didn't even know about the devices until her son told her about them and offered to send them his.

"When you are on the outside and have no means of communication with them, you don't know the reason why they're late," Bonnie said. "It ended up definitely being a lifesaver."

By the time John Simmons reached his hunting buddies he knew the situation was grim and was thankful his wife had urged him and Chepulis to purchase a SPOT.

“I thought it was pretty damn scary,” Simmons said. “He was lying there gurgling.”

Wittman activated the SOS on Chepulis’ SPOT messenger, which requires the user to hold the button down for three seconds.

The SOS signal goes to a SPOT emergency response center, in this case in Montgomery, Texas. The signal includes the GPS coordinates for the sender. The center’s operator then called the Dillon-area forest dispatch center, which called the Madison County Sheriff’s Office, which was closer to the scene of the accident.

“When these buttons are pushed, we really don’t know what the extent of the injuries are,” said Sheriff Dave Schenk.

This was the first time the office had received an SOS from one of the SPOT units. Last year, a hunter had sent a call for help after shooting an elk and seeking assistance packing it out. Incidents like that have made some people in search and rescue question the merits of the devices. Bonnie disagreed.

“That’s one of the positive things I see coming out of this; we have the opportunity to educate people,” she said.

Making the call

Given the remote location of the SOS, nine miles into the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, Schenk decided to call Summit Air Ambulance to fly its Agusta 109E twin-engine helicopter to the site.

“It would have taken us four to six hours just to get up there to him,” Schenk said.

With the exact GPS coordinates, Summit pilot Jeff Cook simply punched the numbers into his helicopter’s GPS and sped to the location with a flight nurse and medic.

While trying to keep Chepulis warm and comfortable, Wittman set his friend’s SPOT messenger down and the unit lost its signal. Worried that the message hadn’t been sent, he reactivated the SOS. Simmons also decided to send an SOS from his unit, to double their odds that the alert would go through.

“We didn’t know if the thing would work,” Simmons said, so the two uninjured hunters began discussing the possibility of riding out for help.

“There was no question in my mind that after two SPOT trackers went off that there was an emergency in place,” Sheriff Schenk said, although the dying of the first signal had confused him.

In the meantime, Schenk contacted Bonnie, who called Simmons’ wife, Marilyn.

“We just hoped and prayed everyone was OK,” Marilyn said. “It was a little tense at times.”

Air rescue

Uncertain how long it might take rescuers to respond, Simmons had fetched a canvas tarp, water and a sleeping bag from their nearby camp to try and keep his injured friend warm and hydrated. As Wittman and Simmons were tending to Chepulis, Summit's helicopter flew over, a welcome sight.

Cook, the helicopter pilot, said the GPS coordinates had taken his crew right to the victim. High winds and the search for a landing spot forced him to circle the aircraft over the area.

"They flew plum out of sight, we couldn't hear them," Simmons said. "Scott thought they had left."

Instead, Cook had set the helicopter down on a nearby ridge to drop the two EMTs. As Cook scouted for a closer place to land, the nurse and medic walked down to assess Chepulis' condition, taped him onto a backboard and put a collar on to immobilize his neck.

Then it was up to the four men to carry the 200-pound-plus Chepulis in a stretcher about 90 yards over the rough terrain to where Cook had found a spot to land the helicopter. Given the windy day, one of the helicopter's crew members was initially left on the mountain to make it easier for the copter to lift off.

Wittman gave the medic a horseback ride to the top of a hill where the helicopter could pick him up and take off again.

It took only two and a half hours from the time that Sheriff Schenk called Summit Air Ambulance until Chepulis was delivered to Bozeman Deaconess Hospital. Cook said the flights from the airport to the SOS site and then on to the hospital took less than a half-hour.

"It was a very, very good model of how (the SPOT) was supposed to work," Cook said.

For his part, Sheriff Schenk said he was very pleased to have a contractor like Summit Air Ambulance to work with in a situation where speed was essential to save a man's life in rugged mountain terrain. The company formed earlier this year to serve rural areas within a 150-mile radius of their base at Belgrade's Gallatin Field.

"If we had not reacted so quickly, it's probably unlikely that John would have survived," Schenk said. "The stars were aligned so perfectly that the helicopter was able to get close."

Tags

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