

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC

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Listening to the Lucky-to-be-Alive

I was at a risk management conference where a presenter advocated spending some time “communing with the dead.” He was not encouraging seances – he was suggesting that we engage in contemplating the details preceding and surrounding certain tragedies, to learn how to avoid them in our own outdoor experiences and leadership. In this article, I am proposing that we spend some time listening to the *lucky-to-be-alive*.

Following are quotes from survivors of several of this past year’s Accidents in North American Climbing (American Alpine Club, 2022). Each of these individuals came out the rough side of an incident or accident alive enough to think and talk about it. The post mortems they offer are not of themselves personally, but of their calamitous events. I have selected four, and then followed each quote with a few thoughts about how we might walk in their recently acquired wisdom. These stories all occurred in the world of rock climbing and mountaineering, but I think the lessons are applicable whatever your outdoor activities of choice might be.

Climbing in Cloudburst Canyon near Lake Tahoe CA, Kyle took a 30’ ground fall. All three pieces of his protection pulled from the rock (bad placements), and he shattered his right calcaneus and fully fractured the talus bone in his left foot.

“The main lesson I learned was to approach climbing with a more focused and safety-oriented attitude. Over the last six years, I had numbed that sense of caution by climbing mostly within my onsight ability. Because I was not taking any falls, I slowly built up a false sense of security both in the gear I was placing and my climbing abilities. This laissez-faire attitude was the reason I skipped many safety checks that day, which could have made this accident possibly fatal.” (pp. 30-31).

Keeping ourselves grounded in reality might require us to have adventure partners who are able to be honest and confront us when we start getting mentally or technically lazy. The temptation to skip safety steps can be resisted by incorporating certain quick rituals or safety checklists into our routines (“*Helmet, Harness, Hookup*”). Atul Gawande saw post-surgical mortality decrease by 30% when he introduced *check-do* and *do-confirm* checklists into surgical practice at 8 pilot hospitals in various places around the world (See The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right, 2009, to learn more). ➔

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Climbing in the Red River Gorge KY, Adam got off-route and had to bail about 10' off the deck. He had not placed any protection gear yet, so decided his best option was to jump down. He experienced shooting pain when he landed, confirmed later as a Lisfranc fracture (the space between the big and second toe). He shares:

“I couldn’t walk for three months, and I still have lingering pain despite months of PT. All of this because I did the wrong start to a 5.7. I learned from the accident to always check and double-check the correct start of the route if unsure. Later, I discovered from a comment on Mountain Project.com that another climber had fallen six feet to the ground while attempting the same start to avoid the chockstone.” (p. 60)

For every adventure, let’s do our homework beforehand. What equipment will be necessary or recommended? What are the hazards that others have experienced in this area? Do we know the escape route if we need to bail? What are the emergency resources in the area? How is the weather forecast, snow condition, river level, etc.? What other factors are variable, and may be different than the last time we were here? Complete the following: **People don’t plan to fail, they simply ___ ___ ___!**

Climbing on Haystack Mtn. in the Wind River Range, ANON took a lead fall 15 feet above his last protection. Clipping a flake with his foot on the way down rotated his body and flipped him upside down. Impact broke his helmet and caused about 30 seconds of unconsciousness. The eventual diagnosis was a concussion, a significant head laceration, and a pinched nerve. Listen to his honest and astute assessment of the issues:

“My biggest lesson from this incident would be that, much like a tool needs to be sharpened, so do climbing skills. Although I was climbing something within my limits, I hadn’t been trad climbing for almost four months prior to the accident. I was rusty and was hopping on a route that had heads-up terrain. If I could change things, I would have eased into the trip instead of going for a route closer to my limit on the first day. Prepare for big objectives by dialing in on smaller routes leading up to the big trip.” (pp. 95-96).

Take a minute to think ahead to some things that you would like to accomplish in this coming year. Now, follow ANON’s advice and write down some progressive steps and checkpoints to work through to get you there. It might help to think of yourself as an athlete in training. This is your training plan, so as you progress, you can monitor your performance to tell you when you are ready for the next step. Also implied in his comments is a dynamic that risk analysts refer to as *scarcity*. This occurs when, for example, we plan a vacation or road trip, and have only so much time to do everything that we want. So, the dangerous tendency is to hurry through preparation, or get out in terrain or weather that is less than ideal because, *“I only have 3 days off and now is my only chance!”* Good judgement falls victim to unexamined opportunism, and we make bad decisions.

Climbing a mixed (ice and rock) route in Hyalite Canyon MT, W slipped and grounded before he was able to get the first bolt clipped. Nearby climbers fashioned a splint out of ice tools and duct tape; eventual diagnosis revealed broken bones in the ankle, but thankfully, no surgery necessary. W’s comments are remarkably honest and revealing:

“The most striking error in the decision-making was my insistence on leading a difficult route with insufficient experience. Though I managed a couple D6/7 top-ropes and a handful of thin ice leads earlier this year, I had never led a proper dry-tool route. Sharp Dressed Man was clearly outside my skill level, but I recall thinking I could easily lead it.” (p. 68)

On the best of days, each of us are infinitely capable of kidding ourselves; then when we add in powerful dynamics like emotion, ambition, and wishful thinking, we can quickly become irrational. W continues:

“I subconsciously believed that, because I hadn’t fallen before, I wouldn’t fall this time. In spite of several recent accidents in the community I seemed to think that I was somehow different and invulnerable. Equally influential was my ego and desire to be respected by the people around me – foremost my partner. His wealth of experience combined with the fact that we’d never climbed together before, made me eager to leave a good impression.” (p. 68)

The ego, simply defined, is *how I wish to be perceived*. And how I wish to be perceived does not necessarily need to have any grounding in the reality of who I am, my abilities and skill set, or anything else. Illustrative of this point is W’s notion of invincibility. None of us are invulnerable – we are all mortal – but W desired to be viewed that way (or wanted to view himself that way). He was also attempting to create an image to the others looking on. So, it is a scary thing to make consequential decisions that we think will reinforce how we wish to be perceived. Sooner or later, reality and truth will call all debts in, and who we really are will be revealed, for better or worse.

If you have engaged with these stories and reflected personally and deeply, then I trust this has been a meaningful exercise for you. Always turn your insights into behaviors; Henri Bergson said: *“Think like a man of action; act like a man of thought.”* Then REPLY back to me at lester@wildguyde.com and let me know your ponderings and applications. Also, I recommend this practice – frequently reading after-action reviews from various sources for personal and professional learning. You can get the Accidents in North American Climbing volumes from any year (available by membership in the American Alpine Club, or from Amazon), or maybe try the biennial American Caving Accidents edition from the National Speleological Society. Happy leading and adventuring out there! **LRZ**

Are you coming to Virginia for a family vacation, church group trip, troop event, or escape weekend? Why not experience Virginia adventure with **WILD GUYde Adventures!** **WGA** offers guided beginner level outdoor adventures and competent instruction in activity fundamentals. We can take you **hiking, rock climbing and rappelling, caving, or canoeing**. We use various activity areas in the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, along Virginia’s Blue Ridge, and in the Potomac Highlands of West Virginia. Check out the 2023 trip options below, or call to talk about your own creative adventure idea!

(540-433-1637 or lester@wildguyde.com)

You may also visit www.wildguyde.com

CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE: 2023 Daytrips with WILD GUYde Adventures, near Harrisonburg, VA

Top-Roping at Hidden Rocks, Virginia: This is the rock climbing trip for the adventurous beginner – you don’t have much experience, but you want a great outdoor day with your family or special friends. Thirty minutes west of Harrisonburg, we’ll park just inside George Washington National Forest, gear up, and hike a scenic 20 minutes through rhododendron and hemlocks and across some mountain streams to a secluded sandstone cliff. There will be pink and white mountain laurel in June, and wild huckleberries in August. You’ll be introduced to harnesses, knots, helmets, and the *belay system*; then we’ll try some easy warm-up climbs to

remind you that the kid inside you still likes to clamber on things. We can go on to some harder climbing that invites you to try new skills and movements. And we'll include in the day a rappel – backing over the edge, with nothing between you and the ground below but 60 feet of air and a great view! Closer to Luray or Northern Virginia? We'll visit **Waterfall Mountain** in the Massanutten Range, or **Little Stony Man** on the Blue Ridge for TALL climbing and spectacular Shenandoah Valley panoramas!

(Full day \$250 for 1-3 people; \$60 for each additional. ½-day \$175 for 1-3, and \$45 for each additional)



Beginner Climbing at Seneca Rocks, WV: Seneca Rocks is a spectacular blade of Tuscarora Sandstone whose summit sits almost 1000 feet above its North Fork Valley floor. Seneca Rocks is a scenic place for the beginner or family to learn the rock climbing basics, top-roping and rappelling to an awesome West Virginia backdrop. Easy routes guarantee early success, but more challenging climbs also wait to test your skills. Seneca Rocks is an awesome place to climb, just beyond the sign: “Here ends the realm of the hiker!”

(Full day \$275 for 1-3 people; \$65 for each additional. ½ day \$200 for 1-3; \$50 each additional)

Multi-Pitch at Seneca Rocks: A little more experienced in climbing? Maybe you tried it at camp or the local rock gym? Ready for the next step? Join me for the multi-pitch experience, seconding the route as we lead-climb to the top of the fabled South Summit! This is the only technical summit in the U.S. east of the Mississippi. Seneca has routes at all ranges of difficulty, from starters like *Old Ladies Route* (5.2) to mid-range classics (*West Pole* 5.7) to old school hardman routes like *Crack of Dawn* and *Madmen Only* (5.10). Every one of them will give you a new appreciation for the expression “high and vertical.” Register your accomplishment and ruminations in the summit journal, wave to tourists way down in the valley, and then head down to *terra firma* via the three-pitch rappel. Finish the day with a splash in the North Fork River swimming hole at “Gravel Beach”; then pick up a cold drink and a West Virginia memento at Harpers General Store

(Full-day: \$275 1st person; \$125 each addl.)

Rock-Craft and Instructional Climbing: This is a tutorial for those who have a little exposure to climbing, and want to gain eventual autonomy. Lots of instruction in current best-practice and hands-on trying it for you in rigging top anchors, belaying skills and equipment alternatives, movement coaching, and rappel setup and protection. There will be individualized attention and repetitive practice, as well as some exploration of the historical evolution of climbing equipment and protocol. You will finish the day with a lot more confidence in your basic skills. Bring a partner so you'll have someone to go climbing with later.

(\$200 1st person; \$125 each for 2nd and 3rd)

WILD GUYde Adventures offers three other rock climbing options: a **Boy Scout Rock Climbing Merit Badge** weekend tutorial for troops and leaders. We send a booklet to get troops started on their knots and First Aid requirements ahead of time, and then spend two days going through all the climbing, gear spec., and rappelling activity requirements (\$90 each). We also offer the **PCIA (Professional Climbing Instructor Association) Top Rope Climbing Instructor Certification** course and exam. This 3-day course (\$450) and 1 day exam (\$150) is for recreational climbers who want to add an outdoor instructor certification on their resume. It's also very useful for individuals guiding with club, camp, or university outing programs. Finally, we offer the **PCIA Climbing Wall Instructor** course and certification (\$275). This two-day instructional prepares individuals to staff indoor climbing operations or towers at climbing gyms, universities, and camps.

Peaceful Paddling: Canoe a casual stretch of the **South Fork River**. This Class I and II water is ideal for families with elementary school children – just long enough to be engaging without getting boring. As we wind through pastures in the Shenandoah Valley, you'll learn basic canoe strokes and maneuvering. Dangle your feet or plunk your head to cool off. And keep watching for blue herons, turtles on logs, and cows in the water!

(Half-Day: \$140 1-3 people; \$35 each additional. Full-Day: \$175 1-3 people; \$45 each additional)





Pick-up-the-Pace Paddling: a fuller day of canoeing awaits further down the **South Fork**. This provides a little more excitement for teenagers, adventurous parents, & other paddle pilgrims! A casual start allows a review of canoe strokes and partner teamwork. An amazing rope-swing breaks the quiet – you won't believe what comes out of your mouth when you let go (“**Geronimo!**?”) More paddling through runs and pools, always under the shadow of Massanutten Mountain. Lunch on the bank and then back into the boats. Finally, at Milepost 17, *Compton's Rapid* – a great shoot-through with some higher standing waves! Paddlers call it a “Fat II,” but stay wide of Pillow Rock! Below, there's a jumping rock for another cool-off before paddling the final mile to the take-out. Load the boats and start the drive home – happy, tired, and maybe a little sun-tanned! West Virginia travelers may want to visit the gorgeous “Trough” on the **South Branch of the Potomac**. High and remote mountain walls on each side of the river, and keep your eyes open for bald eagles!

(Half-Day: \$140 1-3 people, \$35 each additional; Full-Day: \$175 1-3 people; \$45 each additional)

Half-Day Caving: The underground sidewalk and the tourist cave light show are not for you. You want to see it the way it was before the electrician got there! Primitive caves have all the features of the subterranean world – *speleothems* (stalactites, flowstone, soda straws, and columns), *lots of real mud*, and sometimes even *bats* (but most of them are asleep, and all of them are harmless). Pull on your coveralls, clip on your helmet, adjust your headlamp, and down we go. There are squeezes if you want them, and belly crawls for the adventurous --- but there are also corridor ceilings higher than your house, and large cavern rooms for the claustrophobic. Learn cave travel safety, underground navigation, and some “total body movement.” Find out what the year-round underground temperature is, and then finally emerge back into sunlight with a new appreciation for what happens underneath Virginia when limestone and groundwater meet. The gleam of your smile might be the only thing shining through the mud on your face! Caving trips can be **Beginner Caving** (mostly horizontal movement – walking, stooping, or crawling) or **Intermediate Caving** (for folks fit enough to handle strenuous vertical moves, and more sustained physical effort). Various locations are available in both Virginia (20 minutes from Harrisonburg), and West Virginia (between Franklin and Elkins). *Caving trips are not advised for individuals who might be unfit, excessively overweight, or who live an extremely sedentary lifestyle, or for very young children.*



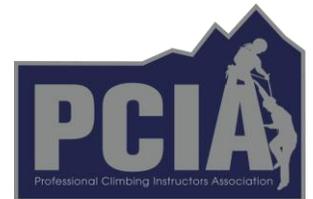
(\$125 for 1-3 people; \$25 for each additional)



Design Your Own Adventure: Numerous other options exist, including hiking and climbing guiding along **Virginia's Blue Ridge** or at the **NROCKS (WV)**, back-country navigation and group orienteering challenges in the National Forest, a climbing self-rescue clinic, outdoor fitness training, and flatwater paddling instruction for beginners and children. We can customize to meet the interests of your family, scout troop, or youth group. Call to talk about your needs.

Things you oughta know:

- **Lester R. Zook** is the **WILD GUYde**. He is a *Wilderness First Responder*, and is an Instructor-Provider for the *Professional Climbing Instructors Assoc*. He has been leading wilderness adventures and training camping leaders for 30 years, and loves to take people outdoors! **Ethan Zook** has been a camp counselor and adventure leader at numerous camps. He is a *Red Cross Lifeguard* and a *Virginia Paramedic*. **Aaron Zook** is a climber, caver, and paddler, a *Red Cross Lifeguard*, and has been through *Wilderness First Aid*. **Mary Tapolyai** is a *WFR*, and a *Leave No Trace Master Educator*. Together, we are a small family business that strives to provide exceptional service, and create value in the lives of our guests.
- More detail on activity possibilities is available by visiting www.wildguyde.com. Call or e-mail to ask questions and to arrange dates, rates, and meeting points:



(540) 433-1637 or lester@wildguyde.com

- **WGA**'s guiding season is 7 days a week. Rock climbing is typically March through October, paddling is best in the spring and summer, and wild caving is year-round. Call early to reserve; weekends in particular can fill quickly.
- **WILD GUYde** will provide all technical equipment (ropes, harnesses, helmets, etc.). A personal *things-to-bring list* (clothing, water, lunch, etc.) will be provided.
- We can also help with **lodging ideas**. We can recommend from *primitive* to *posh* – National Forest campgrounds, drive-up motels, and some delightful Bed and Breakfast inns!
- For groups of 10 or larger, we disregard the starter fee and simply bill the per-person rate.
- Payment is by cash or check, payable to WGA; unfortunately, credit cards cannot be accepted at this time. Gratuities are never expected, and always appreciated!
- Some activities have inherent risks – that's the meaning of the word *adventure*. Participants will be asked to fill out a *Medical Form*, and sign a *Participant Agreement* acknowledging certain dangers. Some activities are physically strenuous, emotionally demanding, or require sustained cognitive attention to task and detail. We make every effort to create a great day, but **WGA** guides do reserve the prerogative to deny access/participation if, in our judgment, the client is not likely to be successful, or might pose undue hazard. Clients also may not be “under the influence” or “feeling the effects” of alcohol or recreational drugs at the time of the event.
- **WILD GUYde Adventures** incorporated in Virginia in 2004, and is fully insured. **WGA** is a permittee with the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, and along Virginia's Blue Ridge. **WGA** is an equal opportunity provider and employer. **WGA** practices environmental stewardship, and is a member of the *Access Fund*, the *National Speleological Society*, the *Virginia Tourism Corp.*, the *Shenandoah Valley Travel Assoc.*, and the *Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce*. You may also check out our profiles at **Trip Advisor**, **YELP**, or **Facebook**.

How was your trip with the *WILD GUYde*??!

Thanks again for guiding us – the trip was awesome! I'm a little sore and bruised today but it makes me happy because it reminds me of everything we did. The info was clear and the location appropriate. I also really enjoyed how you incorporated learning and team building elements into our trip. (Sarah, 2012)

We arrived back in Florida late Thursday night. We had a wonderful time on our adventure with you and we have all been raving to everyone about how great the trip was! Your professionalism and encouragement allowed us to continue on even when some of us were reluctant to try (me, of course)! The boys raved about the caving and the fact that it looked scary, but once you got through it, it wasn't as difficult or scary as you thought it would be. Todd and I were both thrilled with the learning experience for the kids and feel that we have all grown as a result of facing our fears. Everyone talked about what a great guide you were for us! Overall, our adventure was a wonderful experience and the highlight of our trip to VA! (Christine, 2012)

We had a blast, everything was perfect, and you did an amazing job! The pictures are AWESOME! We would recommend you to any outdoor lover! We agreed that we learned so much from you. (Nina, 2012)

Thank you so very much for a wonderful adventure rock climbing last week. It was wonderful to share the time with my daughter. We both really appreciated your teaching style and the knowledge you imparted. I found a whole bucket-full of sermon

illustrations. The location was excellent. We appreciated the fact that we were alone on the climb (except for the beautiful hawk). The photos you took came out well, and we showed them to my wife who appreciated our joy, but was thankful that she chose a more Hobbitish way to spend the day (reading). (Pastor Chris, 2012)

Your customer service was outstanding. Despite my late contact, you found a way to get us in on an adventure. The experience was excellent. The kids had a blast but you were appropriately serious in your approach. Safety was a clear priority as it must be. The experience was well structured and presented a number of great challenges. (Mark, 2012)

Our 3 children (25, 21, 16) went on a rock climbing adventure with Lester. They were beginners and Lester was an excellent guide. He was knowledgeable, safety and detail oriented, and an excellent teacher. They came back smiling and a little sore. Our family isn't the outdoorsy type, but they all said they would definitely do it again! Well worth the drive and the time. (Meredith, 2021)

This was my and my husband's first time rock-climbing. All I can say is that it was an amazing experience. We have done activities from zip-lining and parasailing to sky-diving and I can say this is right up there with all of those activities. I was a bit nervous to start my repel over the edge but Lester makes sure you are confident that your equipment is holding you. Now that I have experienced it, I want to go back and do it again and again. This was a great learning experience and Lester was full of knowledge about rock climbing, repelling, nature, and just life in general. Would recommend to anyone looking for some adventure! (Krysten, 2021)

Lester, we absolutely loved climbing with you! We will be climbing more – that was so fun and challenging yet doable with an incredible adrenaline rush and boost of confidence. Things we learned: How to tie a strong knot; Small footholds do a lot for you; Look down! The harness is holding me; Screaming helps; The hike is not the hard part; You will get giant leg bruises after rock climbing; Don't give up cuz you can make it; Safety, positivity, and being good to nature; Talking with people makes hikes less exhausting; It is quite thrilling to climb 70 feet without falling knowing that you could've done it without a rope. (Haley and Sam, 2021)