

TO THE *RESCUE*

Getting out and enjoying nature's beauty has become even more important to many of us over the past year – but it can be more dangerous than you think. As mountain rescue teams across the region have faced phenomenal added pressure, we find out how hard they have been working to keep us safe



During the first period of national lockdown, Cleveland Mountain Rescue Team had a fairly quiet time, which they say was because everyone largely adhered to the 'stay at home' message from government. In fact, there were only three searches for vulnerable missing people, and no rescue call-outs during lockdown. However, as soon as the first lockdown ended, the team suddenly got much busier, with seven call-outs in less than a month (including three in one week). In 2020, they attended 23 searches, 29 rescues, one flooding incident, two ambulance assists, two animal rescues and one body recovery.

Meanwhile, the Northumberland National Park Mountain Rescue Team recorded a much more significant increase in the number of incidents, most notably in the rescue of lost and injured individuals. In 2020, the team recorded 150 incidents, compared to 83 in 2019 – an increase of 80 percent. The team responded to 37 rescues for injured persons (an increase of nearly 40 percent on 2019) and all apart from one of the rescues were on the hills, moors and crags of Northumberland as more of us headed out to these areas for our daily exercise. Of these incidents, eight were for lost walkers, and a significant

proportion were for inexperienced and ill-equipped individuals or groups. However, the team's vital work wasn't focused solely on those who got themselves lost, they also responded to incidents including a county-wide flood issue in February, two wildfires on Simonside in April, and to deal with snow, working alongside Northumbria Police.

A similar increase was reported from Teesdale and Weardale Search and Mountain Rescue Team. The average number of call-outs they tend to receive is around 40 but, despite being locked down for a significant amount of time in 2020, the number of incidents they attended last year was 54. This wasn't just in the more inaccessible upland areas either, there were a number of call-outs to popular countryside spots, to help those who had been injured by a simple slip on wet, muddy or icy ground, or who had got into difficulties because their planned walk took longer than anticipated and it got dark.

We caught up with individual members of each team to find out how they coped in an unexpected year, how they are preparing to keep us safe once we can visit the countryside after our third national lockdown, and what we can all do to help.

SAVING SOUTH

Cleveland Mountain Rescue Team cover approximately 400 square miles, from the northern half of the North York Moors, along the coast from Sandsend up to Hartlepool and into the Tees Valley. The team was established in 1965 after the Lyke Wake Walk became increasingly popular and a growing number of people were getting lost or getting injured attempting the 42-mile route. The National Park Wardens were having to deal with these problems more frequently and, as a result, they decided to form two rescue teams – Cleveland Search and Rescue Team (as they were called until 2012) and Scarborough and Ryedale Search and Rescue Team, covering the area further south. Since those days, when they relied on team members' Land Rovers for transport and borrowed equipment, they have evolved to be among the best equipped and most highly-trained mountain rescue teams in the country.

We spoke to team member Gary Clarke, whose favourite aspect of his volunteering is the sense of camaraderie with his team mates while helping people in need. He told us that 2020 was a year of peaks and troughs.

'After the first lockdown ended and our call-outs rose significantly, we feared that may be the start of a trend, but thankfully things eased off,' he

recalls. 'During the second half of the year, and as the tier system was introduced, things were fairly settled, although December's figures did suggest that we were heading for an increase into the New Year – but to date that hasn't materialised (with just one call in January so far).'

Gary notes that the main challenge to his work last year was getting used to the new equipment. 'Having to use PPE such as gloves, masks, and waterproof clothing on call-outs and training made life difficult at times, especially in hot weather,' he explains. Gary goes on to say: 'The other big change for us was the difficulty in training, with a move to online training and video meetings to keep face-to-face contact to a minimum.'

The team in Cleveland normally have around 45–50 search and rescue team members, including Gary, who are on call 24 hours a day, every day of the year. As with the other search and rescue teams (and their support teams) in our region, they are all volunteers: there are no paid staff and their services are offered for free to anyone who needs them. In addition, they have an operational support team with around 25 members who help with fundraising activities and maintaining the vehicles and equipment.



They're reliant on the generosity of local people and groups to cover the £42,000 it costs to run the team each year, and the lack of fundraising events last year has had a huge impact. 'Almost all of our traditional fundraising events were cancelled from March onwards, including three significant outdoors walking and running events that we hold each year,' Gary explains. 'We lost an estimated £12-15,000 from those alone. The overall loss of income was estimated at £30,000 - set against average annual running costs of £42,000, that was a big loss.'

Fortunately, the team managed to tap into some grants and community awards, meaning that their running costs through the winter were covered. 'But 2021 looks like it will be another funding challenge,' says Gary. 'Certainly in the first half of the year, if our events don't restart.'

'It's surprising how many people don't realise that we are all unpaid volunteers and that mountain rescue is a charity with no central funding. Many people think we are employed, as such, and don't realise that we are called out from our homes and work.'

How can we help?

'At the moment the best way that people can help is to abide by the government "stay home, stay local" advice. In more normal times, it's to ensure that they are fully prepared for outdoor exercise.'

Where are you called out to most often?

'One of our busiest areas tends to be a local landmark hill, Roseberry Topping. A lot of people walk to the summit; the paths can be slippery and we get a number of calls from walkers with lower leg injuries.'



Northumberland National Park Mountain Rescue Team

RESCUING NORTH

Northumberland National Park Mountain Rescue Team covers the whole of Northumberland and Tyne and Wear - the largest area of any mountain rescue team in England, and they respond jointly to incidents with their sister team, North of Tyne Mountain Rescue Team. The team was formed by a number of Northumberland National Park voluntary rangers in 1965 following the tragic deaths of two shepherds in a snow storm close to Ewarty Shank in The Cheviots in November 1963.

We spoke to team leader Iain Nixon, whose favourite aspect of his volunteering is the feeling that you are doing good and giving something back, and working alongside other like-minded people.

As team leader, Iain is responsible for running the team and its future development. He's responsible for coordinating and managing their response to incidents following any request from the police, ambulance and fire services for assistance. However, he's also an operational member who goes out with the team to rescue injured or search for lost individuals. 'This can involve driving on blue lights in one of our 4x4 response vehicles, locating individuals, often high up in The Cheviot Hills, and escorting them off the hill, carrying medical kit and stretchers into an incident site, treating and then evacuating an injured person on a stretcher, working in a small search group to search a designated area or route to find a missing person in an urban area - and so on,' Iain explains.

It's clear from speaking to Iain that it's the teamwork that keeps everyone going. 'Doing what we do very much requires a collective effort. Being in mountain rescue is like having another full time job but without the financial recompense. But there are plenty of intrinsic rewards,' he says.

'Covid-19 has added complexity to what is already a challenging situation,' Iain continues. 'As a team, we have had to develop and implement new procedures to keep our members safe, and these are constantly under review. These procedures include the appropriate use and disposal of PPE, the decontamination of vehicles and quarantining of vital rescue equipment, and the implications for both training and how we respond to incidents.'



Northumberland National Park Mountain Rescue Team

'We have had the challenge of wearing an IIR face mask, eye protection, double nitrile gloves and full waterproofs whilst carrying a stretcher in temperatures of up to 30C. We had the challenge of wearing eye protection as the weather has got colder and the glasses or goggles fog up to the point at which we can't see. Essentially, the PPE we need to use to safeguard ourselves and the casualty has not been designed for the environment we are using it in.'

It costs £35-40,000 a year to operate the team, and this excludes major items like a new vehicle. For example, the team invested in a third response vehicle in 2019 which cost £56,000.

'All of our collection tins have been behind closed doors in pubs and shops for a significant proportion of the year, so income from collecting tins has been significantly down,' Iain says. 'In addition, the team would normally provide medical cover and support to a number of outdoor challenge events each year, including our own Cheviots Challenge. All these events were cancelled in 2020.' These events would normally generate more than £10,000 each year for the team.

How can we help?

'Supporting the team and the emergency service we provide.'

Where are you called out to most often?

'The Cheviot Hills - the highest hills in the area with incident hotspots such as the Pennine Way along the Border Ridge between England and Scotland, the Harthope Valley and surrounding hills like The Cheviot and Hedgehope Hill, and Linhope Spout. Incidents generally involve walkers and fell/trail runners. Simonside for walkers and climbers, Hadrian's Wall for walkers, the Peel Crag and Crag Lough (situated along the Whin Sill outcrop) for climbers, and Kielder Forest for mountain bikers mainly, but walkers too.'



Cleveland Mountain Rescue Team

'It's surprising how many people don't realise that we are all unpaid volunteers'

FROM THE FELLS TO THE COAST

Teesdale and Weardale Search and Mountain Rescue Team provide a search and rescue service for the whole of County Durham, from the high fells in the west to the coastal communities. Supported wholly by donations, the team was founded following an accident in Teesdale in 1968, in which two young men lost their lives while hiking. A group of men from the Upper Dales realised that there were more people walking for leisure and there was no service available to help should they get into difficulties. Today, it has its own search and rescue youth team programme open to 16–18 year olds which provides a good foundation should the members wish to join the team.

We caught up with Scott Bisset, who has worked for the team for more than 20 years. 'For me, the best aspect of being a mountain rescue volunteer is knowing that you've made a difference by helping in some way,' he says. 'I was lucky enough to be brought up in the rugged countryside of upper Weardale, which I didn't appreciate until I was older, so doing this is me giving something back.'

The kind of incident Scott and his team mates get called out to include rescuing motorists trapped in snow, recovering mountain bikers from forests, searching for vulnerable people and even rescuing animals which have fallen down holes. This is on top of general injuries where people need assistance, but ambulances can't reach them. They have also noticed a significant drop in funding.

'Like most charities, we have suffered from a huge drop in income in 2020'

'Like most charities, we have suffered from a huge drop in income in 2020,' he tells us. 'Thankfully we are well prepared for this so our team's work will not be affected in the following year. The loss of income probably won't be felt until we need to replace one of our vehicles, when we may find it has to stay with us for a bit longer. To this end we are making a concerted effort to look after our vehicles better.'

How can we help?

'If you are walking: know the route and terrain, check the weather forecast, have the appropriate clothing and footwear, carry spare dry clothing, a torch, spare batteries, a map, or, with modern technology – a mapping app on your phone. Ensure your phone is fully charged. I recommend apps such as OS Locate and View Ranger: these both give accurate OS grid references which are the preferred method of location used by search and rescue.'

Where are you called out to most often?

Outdoor sports have grown rapidly in recent years so we tend to get quite a few calls to locate, treat and evacuate mountain bikers. River searches have also featured in searches on several occasions, from kayakers to missing students.

If you wish to support the individual teams mentioned please visit clevelandmrt.org.uk, nnpmrt.org and twsmt.org.uk.



BE PREPARED

After speaking to these three local heroes, one common thread ran throughout: they all recommended following Adventure Smart's guidance. They offer great advice for keeping safe before you set off exploring, all focused around three key questions:

1. Do I have the right GEAR?
2. Do I know what the WEATHER will be like?
3. Am I confident I have the KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS for the day?

For more advice from Adventure Smart visit adventuresmart.uk