

# Hiking in the Desert

**By Lisa Schulz**

In mid-April, an experienced SCOV Hiking Club member collapsed from heat exhaustion on the challenging 10-mile Box Camp Trail from Mt Lemmon to Sabino Canyon. Even with water to spare, having lost essential body salts (electrolytes) faster than they were replaced, the hiker became dehydrated, could walk no further, had difficulty swallowing fuel offered by companions, and required life-saving rescue operations culminating in helicopter evacuation almost 3 hours later. Heat exhaustion can lead to heat stroke, and even death. Don't let this happen to you!

In the desert, ample water is not enough. Electrolyte replacement, which assures that your body can use that water, is vital, along with a carbohydrate snack in order for electrolyte supplements (such as SaltStick Fastchews, Nuun Sport tablets or Propel powder packets) to be absorbed. Always pack more water, supplements, and snacks (such as Honey Stinger Waffles or energy chews) than you think you will need and start drinking from the very start of the hike, even before you feel thirsty. Because dehydration can make swallowing difficult, include dry mouth lozenges in your first aid kit. Plan for frequent breaks in patches of shade. These safety principles apply to any time of the year in Arizona's dry climate, not just on hot days.

This hiker was lucky. The hiking party included 3 other club members, 2 of whom carried a GPS signaling device with the SOS inReach app. Because cell reception in the Pusch Ridge Wilderness is unreliable, the ability to text information to the rescuers via satellite was critical. Both Southern Arizona Rescue Association (SARA) volunteers and the PIMA County Sheriff's Department Search and Rescue (PCSDSAR) team responded to the distress call. The victim slowly sipped a strong electrolyte mix provided by the other hikers, who each waited exposed in the hot sun for 2 hours before help arrived. They had already been hiking for about 5 hours without shade when the collapse occurred at 2pm in the heat of the day.

SARA put a total of ten rescuers on the trail, each equipped with electrolyte fluids and water, including a crew hauling a just-in-case gurney up Sabino Canyon Trail. An Arizona Department of Public Safety helicopter was brought in to perform a short-haul mountainside rescue. The helicopter lowered Deputy Sheriff and medic Mike Johnson to the victim by cable since the terrain was too steep and rocky to permit safe landing. It took about 45 minutes to transport both victim and medic using a suspended harness technique to Tram Stop #8, where an ambulance waited to whisk the victim to Tucson Medical Center (TMC).

SARA lead rescuer Granny Grant assessed the ability of the other 3 hikers to sustain the 2 additional hours of steep descent it would take to hike out, supplied them with cold fluids, and accompanied them to Tram Stop #9, where a SARA vehicle waited to escort them to their car at the Sabino Canyon parking lot. For these hikers, the usual 6-to-7-hour hike and its rigorous 5,000 ft descent took 10 hours.

Interested in rescue operations? Rescue is a free service in the state of Arizona. Southern Arizona Rescue Association (SARA) membership is open to anyone interested in search and rescue or in helping to enhance public outdoor safety awareness in southern Arizona. SARA is a non-profit, all volunteer search and rescue organization serving Pima County and southern Arizona since 1958. SARA teams typically respond to more than 100 rescue missions each year, representing more than 4,400 hours of volunteer time at no direct expense to taxpayers. Technical training and medical certification can take members up to ten months to complete. Besides finding hikers who have gotten injured, lost or stranded by floodwaters, crews are specially trained to extract fall victims from mountains, caves, and mineshafts. SARA has been hosted by the SCOV Hiking Club in the past, and provides free public education presentations to audiences upon request.

For more information on SARA or how to join, visit the [sarci.org](http://sarci.org) website, check out the current issue of the SARNews newsletter, email [SARAJoin@sarci.org](mailto:SARAJoin@sarci.org), or contact them by mail at Southern Arizona Rescue Association, PO Box 12892, Tucson, AZ 85732-2892, or by phone (520)955-8686. Follow SARA on Facebook to stay up-to-date on all of their events.

