



Sidetracked

My Brother's Keeper, A "LOST" Art

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Getting lost in the backcountry is no joke. Whose job is it to keep the group together when the ride leaves the pavement? What responsibility does the individual have?

“Where’s Rick?” asks Ken, our ride leader. Our group of 11 men is on the way to Copper Canyon, Mexico. It’s springtime and it’s hot this far south. We stop at a village for a break before setting off on the next leg.

Paul pipes up, “I dunno. He was right behind me. I thought he backed off to stay clear of the dust.”

“Dave’s missing too,” someone else volunteers. Our leader seems oblivious to his error. We were never instructed about how we would stay together. The support vehicle rolls up on our motley crew and the driver frowns as he takes a head count. Nine bikes ... two guys from Canada are missing, in Mexico, and it’s growing late.

It’s a bad feeling, being lost. You wonder, “Do I go back, go faster, or stay put and hope someone will find me?” Anyone who has spent much time riding off-road in a group has probably had this experience in one form or another. You have either waited for someone to show up, been part of the search party, or maybe you were “That Guy.” Could some of the responsibility be your own?

One key to prevention is organization. Another is having riders who are reasonably matched to the group’s general speed or in agreement to adjust to the slowest riders.

But vetting participants is a crapshoot. Riders often misrate their skills. It’s seldom intentional, but the less you know, the less you know what you don’t know. You might be pretty zippy at the local ORV park on your dirt bike, but get hitched to a bunch of hot shoes on big adventure bikes over rough terrain and you could find yourself pushing the envelope to keep up. Before you know it, you’ve blown a turn, crashed, or realized you were riding into the sunset ... alone.

A good leader will choose and communicate how the group will remain together. One sure method is to regroup at every intersection. The leader takes a head count before proceeding. If a rider is missing, someone must go back to search before carrying on. This process is slow and tends to put everyone back in the dust until they can spread out again.

Another method is posting turns. At each intersection, the leader watches for a signal that the next rider has seen them before proceeding. Subsequent riders take turns posting in the same manner. Each posting rider must remain visible (not park in the shade 100 feet ahead), or the next rider may blow the turn, requiring the one who posted to give chase. This can create an almost comical calamity as trailing riders catch up and find themselves meeting the returning riders head on.

A third method is leapfrogging. The leader ensures that the second rider sees him make the turn. That rider then posts the turn, allowing the rest to ride by, counting each one.

Once the last rider passes, he brings up the rear. The rotation continues, giving everyone a chance to circulate through the pack. This is by far the fastest of the three and it keeps the group together. Regardless of the method chosen, a designated chase rider can bring up the rear and help as needed.

Slower riders often struggle to keep up, compromising their safety, and are more likely to be accidentally left behind if they are leaving large gaps. The day of the ride isn’t the time to push the envelope. If this is you, rather than adopting the mindset of “That’s just my speed” but still joining spirited rides, practice beforehand with a trusted buddy. It may be helpful to get some training specific to lively trail work and gradually improve your skills. Next time you’re out with the gang, you just might find yourself enjoying it that much more, and the confidence is worth the effort. The fact is, on a group ride, we are each our “brother’s keeper.” It’s everyone’s job to keep watch.

... We wait another 15 minutes before Ken turns back to search. He is almost out of sight when two plumes of dust appear on the horizon. It’s Rick and Dave.

Rick pulls up and says, “I was riding for all I was worth when everyone disappeared. I had no idea you turned back there.”

Dave chimes in with, “We lost you guys! I was following Rick when he finally figured out there weren’t any more tracks. Man, I was getting worried. How do you say ‘I’m Canadian and I’m lost’ in Spanish?” **RR**