

Expedition unknown

Even the best-laid plans can go awry, as Network member Oscar Williams discovered

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For our practice Queen Scout Award expedition, we decided to venture out to the moorlands of Dartmoor. After a five-hour train journey, the market town of Totnes welcomed us with clear blue skies. We pitched our tents in sunny weather and went to sleep that night trusting the weather gods would be on our side for the rest of the expedition. But the scenario the next morning was very different: dense fog, heavy rain and winds at 40 mph. Not exactly what we'd bargained for.

Our cozy sleeping bags became our refuge. We patiently waited for the miserable weather to pass but water kept pouring out of the sky and our tents blew around like carrier bags. As minutes turned into hours, our concerns rose – would we ever be able to start our expedition? The rain finally stopped and the wind subsided. Our team of five set off into the mist. After walking two miles, darkness began to set in and we decided to pitch our tent on the side of a hill.

The next morning we woke up and our GPS informed us that we had camped almost half a mile away from where we were meant to be. We were already behind our planned route so we decided to re-route our journey. We phoned our leaders to get their approval for our new route and off we went.

Our second day was more successful. The miles seemed to fly by and we were able to stick to our new game plan. But when the time came to find a suitable place to pitch our tent, we found ourselves in a conundrum.

We were at the top of a swampy hill. Our first thought was to walk down and find a drier patch of ground on the side of the hill. But we quickly ruled that one out because nobody wanted to sleep in a tent at a 45-degree angle. We could see a flat, dry patch of ground further down in the valley. Flat, dry ground – what could go wrong?

With our tent successfully pitched, the heavens opened yet again. We took shelter and called it a night, but just a few hours later, I was woken by one of my fellow campers.

I placed my hand on the floor only to feel a cold and wet ground sheet. Peering through the tent door, I realised my tent was floating on six inches of water. Water was gushing down the hillside and into our campsite.

We put on our raincoats, turned on our GPS tracker and tried to phone our leaders, but we couldn't get hold of them and the wind had already picked up. Heavy rain started to pour. Our attempt to move our tents resulted in a soggy pile of ripped canvas and broken poles. We had to make a decision and our only option was to walk off the moors that night.

But our challenges were far from over. The only bridge over the river was flooded and it was impossible to cross. Soaked and tired, we trembled through the knee-deep marshlands and walked the long way around the river. The only form of reliable navigation was my emergency hand-held GPS unit.

We spent two hours trudging through the bog. The chances of us getting to our pick-up point seemed to be getting slimmer by the minute. We erected our emergency shelter and huddled up for warmth until eventually – reluctantly – we sent out an SOS signal.

As the minutes passed, we sat in the bitter cold anxiously looking at our phone. Over the course of the next few hours, six emergency calls were made. To the best of my ability, I remained calm. It wasn't easy reassuring the rest of my team, who were all anxious and scared that the icy cold water and weather conditions would lead to hypothermia.

Finally, at 3:30am, a beam of light shone out through the darkness. A 4x4 and a team on foot had reached us. The sense of relief was immense.

Our expedition had turned out to be a lot more demanding than any of us had anticipated, but our sense of accomplishment at having pushed through the many challenges was immense. We're already looking forward to our next adventure. ⚜