

Jenn Sparks:

What's always interesting, though, is when somebody comes up to you months or years later and said, "Oh gosh, you rescued me," or saved me, and you're out of character, you're out of uniform... how did you recognize me?

Jenn Sparks:

It's just happened to me the other day, at the grocery store. Someone came up to me and like, "Oh, you're Jenn, you rescued me a couple years ago."

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Thank you for tuning into another episode of the Voices of Greater Yellowstone podcast. I'm your host, Kristin Oxford. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which spans over 20 million acres across parts of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, is a vast and expansive landscape home to remote peaks, wild rivers, and iconic wildlife.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

As such, it is also replete with opportunities for adventure. There is no shortage of hikers, mountain bikers, climbers, mountaineers, hunters and more, out exploring the landscape at any given moment. With all that space and so many people out in it, there's also no shortage of opportunities to get in a bit of trouble.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, what happens when you fall down a slope and break your leg miles from the trail head, or a friend of yours went out for a hike but it's hours after they were supposed to return and there's no sign of them? Luckily, Greater Yellowstone is home to a number of amazing search and rescue teams such as Teton County Search and Rescue, whose highly trained members are equipped to respond to emergencies across an unpredictable, and sometimes unforgiving, landscape.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Search and rescue teams are made up of dedicated volunteers specializing in back country medicine, missing person behavior, swift water rescue, technical rope rescue, and so much more. As a former search and rescue volunteer myself, I was really excited for today's episode where we talk with Jenn Sparks, a member of the Teton County Search and Rescue team. Jenn has been a search and rescue volunteer since 1998 and she's also a board member of the Teton County Search and Rescue Foundation. The foundation supports the team and conducts mountain safety, outreach, and education in the greater Jackson Hole community.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Jenn joined us via video chat from her home in Wyoming, and just a heads up, her dog was in the room as well, so you will hear some signs of life in the background. We spoke with Jenn about what drew her to search and rescue, the nuts and bolts of being on a team, the types of training exercises they conduct and how they stay safe doing it all in grizzly bear country.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

We'll also hear about a few memorable moments from the field, discover what's in Jenn's pack and most importantly, learn what her favorite knot is. All right, let's jump in, albeit carefully and learn more about the incredible work that goes into search and rescue operations, in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay. First up, just go ahead and state your name, tell us where you live, perhaps describe your involvement with the Teton County Search and Rescue team and then if you so choose, let us know what you do when you're not volunteering with the team.

Jenn Sparks:

Okay, great. Well, my name is Jenn Sparks and I have been on Teton County Search and Rescue since 1998. I live in Teton County, Wyoming, in the town of Jackson, and when I'm not volunteering for our search and rescue team, I'm also on several other boards in our county. Jackson Hole Land Trust, Snake River Fund, Bridger Teton Avalanche Center, Teton Regional Land Conservancy... I think I hit them all.

Jenn Sparks:

When I am not volunteering in my non-profits, I, just, sort of my own business. I was in finance for the last 25 years and I just spun out and I started my own business called Sparks and Rec and it's helping businesses, entrepreneurs, families integrate more thoughtfully and philanthropically, into the valley as they move into Jackson Hole, sort of be boots on the ground.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

That is amazing. You are a busy gal and I got to say Sparks and Rec, great name choice.

Jenn Sparks:

Thank you.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

That's really wonderful. So you've been on the team since 1998. What first drew you to join?

Jenn Sparks:

So, when I moved to Jackson in 1989, really dating myself, I had lived here several years and I wanted to give back to the community in some fashion. So, there was a tiny ad in the paper looking for volunteers. I didn't have a medical background or, I was sort of still new and fresh to the county and I just thought it would be an interesting way to volunteer my time and sort of give back.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Awesome. What was the recruitment process like, apart from just seeing an ad in the paper? How did you actually go from seeing the ad to getting on the team?

Jenn Sparks:

It was an interview process. They still have my picture from 1993, tacked up. It was much more simple than it is today. To be honest, I don't remember all the details, but we did go through a training. I think it

was probably six months to a year of a trial timeframe, to show your skills or show how you are as a teammate, get integrated. Much different today.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah. So what is it like today, for new folks?

Jenn Sparks:

Today? We just onboarded 10 new folks in the last... it's been a long time. And we had COVID in there, so that was on pause. We had, I think, over 150 applicants this time, for 10 spots. And so, we pared it down to 10 people, that's what we onboarded. We had wanted to bring on 10 new folks.

Jenn Sparks:

And it's a year long process, now. It's pretty regimented and it's a lot of time and energy and dedication. And not that it wasn't back in 1998, it's just a different process these days. When I was brought onto the team, we were not under the umbrella of the sheriff's office, and now we are part of Teton County Sheriff's Department.

Jenn Sparks:

We're all volunteers though, so we're not paid. But back in the day, it was not part of the sheriff's office. A little bit more wild, crazy,

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Right. Yeah. A little bit more loosey goosey setup.

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

I know quite a few search and rescue teams sort of sprang up pretty organically, several decades ago and of course, now it's much more regimented with MOUs, with sheriff's departments or operating within a sheriff's department or all that. It's like, we got to keep tabs on all these wild SAR volunteers.

Jenn Sparks:

There's advantages and disadvantage, to that.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, sure, absolutely. So, how would you just describe search and rescue as a concept to somebody who was just fundamentally unfamiliar with it?

Jenn Sparks:

Sure. So, I guess our tagline, our mission statement, is to save lives. We don't do urban rescues, we do rescues in the back country, anything in Teton County. And I would say our team is called out when there's a missing person or someone's in trouble or someone's hurt. But again, in the back country, not in the confines of the town.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, I'm assuming the sheriff's department takes care of urban search and rescue, but then Teton County Search and Rescue is deployed to those back country situations? Yeah, when you probably need a different skill set to find somebody or extract somebody. So, what are some of the types of skills that team members either train in or expect are expected to be proficient at?

Jenn Sparks:

First and foremost, I would say to be a great teammate, to have each other's back. That makes a really amazing team member. And to have trust in each other, good communication, but... And some of the softer skills, empathy and working with each other.

Jenn Sparks:

But some of the other skills that we train in are rigging for rescue, swift water mapping is a big part of it, we do medical training, back country skiing. We train in back country skiing, most of the team members are already proficient skiers, because it's such a big part of our community. But as I guess back country skills in the outdoor or in the wintertime. I would say that's it. I think I got them all.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So yeah, a pretty broad array of skills, in order to operate in this kind of terrain. Do you have any specific skill set on the team or is everyone kind of expected to be proficient at all of those things or can folks actually specialize?

Jenn Sparks:

I would say there are people on the team that are really skilled in mountaineering and swift water, rigging for rescue, et cetera. I like wintertime rescues. I also like just sort of the all year round missing person, getting out in the woods, tracking mapping. I would say that's my proficient, carrying heavy gear.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah.

Jenn Sparks:

I mean our team, it's really heavy in the medical, there's a lot of WFRs, we have two ER doctors, a few nurses, a lot of EMTs. We're all trained in medical, like I mentioned, but they probably wouldn't ask me to pull traction on somebody's tip fib, when we have a lot of other skilled members on the team.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, absolutely. Is there a minimum level of medical training that folks are expected to have, like a WFR?

Jenn Sparks:

Yes. And we're all basic life saving, BLS.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay.

Jenn Sparks:

And yes, actually just past weekend, we just all went through re-certify for CPR and patient packaging.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay, yeah, which I'm sure is particularly important in a place that gets such cold winters. And for folks listening, who may not be familiar with the acronym, WFR just stands for, or means, wilderness first responder. So it's just a type of wilderness medical training that folks can get.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay, so Jenn, you mentioned you were also a board member of the Teton County Search and Rescue Foundation and I'm just curious what kinds of things the foundation does to support the team.

Jenn Sparks:

Sure. So our bylaws for the foundation ask that two teammates be the liaison and sit on the foundation board. So, the foundation really supports the team, not only in providing gear but also additional trainings.

Jenn Sparks:

You can ask the foundation if you want to go back and get your WFR, and see if the foundation would help pay for that. Or if you're really into rigging for rescue, they might pay for you to go and take an additional class or course in that.

Jenn Sparks:

So, it's really supporting the team in whatever area that might be. Not monetarily, but food, supplying gear, and safety gear and education.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

What a great resource to have. That's really wonderful.

Jenn Sparks:

It's really amazing. The foundation goes above and beyond their duties, for sure. And I know that also as a teammate, but also as being a foundation member.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, I mean especially I would imagine since search and rescue is all volunteer, or at least in this context, all volunteer, to have that additional support I'm sure must be really nice since folks aren't getting paid. So yeah, some support with professional development and gear and all that I'm sure goes a long way.

Jenn Sparks:

Yes. In addition, they do supplies with a stipend, which is a nice if you're lacking in, whatever you need it for. You know, your hiking boots burned out, you need a new... I don't know, whatever it might be.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Sure. Yeah. Because I'm sure team gear probably gets put through its paces quite a bit, so you're probably seeing some significant turnover in hiking boots, et cetera. Okay, so now that we know a little bit about the team, let's get oriented to place.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, tell us a bit about Teton County itself. What kind of terrain does the county cover, where it's roughly located, within Wyoming, and leading question here, if there's perhaps any significant points of national interest within the county? Tell us about the county.

Jenn Sparks:

Teton County's located in northwest Wyoming, very rugged. In Teton County, Grand Teton National Park is located in part of Yellowstone. So, Grand Teton National Park has its own rescue team, but we do work closely with them and do a lot of collaboration and do a lot of rescues together. We work closely with them, not only on with our short haul team, but just the team in general. We have each other's back that way. It's quite amazing collaboration and crossover.

Jenn Sparks:

So, the terrain is rugged, it's vast, a lot of open space. There's a lot of for service BLM land, that people recreate on. Areas that have trail systems, but a lot of areas that don't.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, okay. So, big wild country for sure.

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

I mean, the same kinds of things that presumably draw folks to visit this landscape because it is so wild and magnificent I would imagine also make for some pretty tricky terrain features, when you're talking about a search and rescue operation.

Jenn Sparks:

Yes. That's why you're mapping skills need to be spot on, as you're looking for, let's just say for an example, making sure you're reading the map, that we're not going into some sort of cliffed out area or steep terrain.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Right. So, probably some of the same hazards that would get folks stuck in the first place can also present some serious challenges for search and rescue personnel.

Jenn Sparks:

Yes, exactly.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah. So, what kinds of things does the team do to train for this, to accommodate and prepare for the challenges of working, in a landscape like this, in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem?

Jenn Sparks:

Sure. I would say first, you should have the proper gear. As far as making sure what you're getting yourself into on rescue, you're well outfitted for that. Whether it's a 24 hour pack, whether it's the right shoes, whether it's the right layers. So, have that.

Jenn Sparks:

And that's sort of always in the back of your mind when you got a rescue it's like, "What do I need today? Do I need bear spray? Do I need my swift water gear?" So, as far as how do we prepare for that, I mean each rescue is totally different, so everyone on the team is somewhat fit, or if you're feeling like you don't want to go on this rescue or you're not prepared, you can self-select and say, "I'll stay behind. I'll get food, I'll help in the IC, which is instant command center, I'll drive the trucks, I'll shuttle."

Jenn Sparks:

So, people are pretty good at self-selecting if it's an area that you're not proficient in. And as far as training, each month we have a dedicated Saturday that we train and you know ahead of time what you're getting into. For example, like I mentioned, last weekend was medical training CPR, so studying ahead of time to see what's needed on that. And then, we have a Wednesday, once a month training to sort of prepare for what's coming up that weekend.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay.

Jenn Sparks:

In addition, we always do supplemental trainings during the month and then, I mean, just being on rescue is considered training.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Sure, yeah. So big time commitment, even if you never went on a call out, it sounds like it'd be a big time commitment, just to participate in the degree of training, which is comforting and good to know.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, you mentioned one of the ways to prepare of course is to have the right things with you. What are some of the things that we would find in a team member's pack?

Jenn Sparks:

Sure. So our foundation has a dedicated person that does PSAR, which is preventative search and rescue. And they run these What's in Your Pack classes, which are amazing for locals or for anyone in the valley that signs up for it.

Jenn Sparks:

But a typical pack, different in the winter versus summer, but we always have... My pack always has water, food and extra puffy hand warmers, headlamp, hot gloves. If this time of year, let's just say fall, I would have bear spray, I would have my mapping device, which would be on my phone. CalTopo is an app that we use, to help us find people or get to the location.

Jenn Sparks:

I think I hit the highlights. But definitely extra clothes, extra layers, extra layers for the patient or for the person that is hurt or missing. That's it.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Pretty comprehensive. And of course, you mentioned bear spray, so for folks who don't live in Bear Country the way that we do, are there any other precautions you would take or considerations?

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Because not only are you in this sort of challenging environment, but also, we have big, somewhat, sometimes scary, wildlife in this area. So any other things that you have to do to prepare for possible wildlife interactions?

Jenn Sparks:

I mean, we never go out solo, so we're always paired up in two, three, four. So, we make a lot of noise, carry bear spray. We talked to each other on the radio like, "Hey, we just saw a grizzly," or, "Saw a bear, a moose," et cetera.

Jenn Sparks:

Knock on wood, we've never had an incident with a large carnivore or other sort of animals, but we just recently, in the last I think it's two years, we have a bear tactical team, that's been new and it's a collaboration between the sheriff office, the Forest Service, a few members on our teams that they train separately... Because we've encountered some bear maulings in some of our rescues and we thought it would be to sort of step it up a little bit in that area and be prepared, if we do.

Jenn Sparks:

So, it's basically this bear tactical team would go in, when we know it's a known mauling or if there's a bear. And the team, this is a specific team that does that, but everyone of us is trained with the knowledge of how to deal with the bear, et cetera.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay. Yeah. Wow, that is really interesting. So, yeah, everybody has to be prepared for the possibility of a wildlife encounter, but a special tactical team, if you know that you're dealing with a bear in particular.

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah. And we just did a training, it was probably two months ago on really how that scenario would play out. So, it's a good learning experience.

Kristin Oxford, Host:



Yeah, I can imagine. Okay, so a bear specific scenario is one thing. What are some of the other types of call outs that the team might respond to? Give us some just broad strokes examples of the types of operations you participate in.

Jenn Sparks:

So, this year's been particular busy. We have had, I believe, 108 callouts, year to date. Just for reference, last year by the end of the year, we had 105 rescues. So, we're already surpassed that and we're not even into ski season yet.

Jenn Sparks:

But I would say the last... Maybe just looking through the summertime, we had a lot of bike accidents, had missing hikers, we had dehydrated runners, we've had a lot of horseback accidents. We've had missing people, we've had a lot of river rescues, a few fatalities, unfortunate fatalities, in the last six months. That's about it.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

I mean, that's pretty intense list. What way do you say, if you just had to guess, because I'm sure there's a very specific data on this, but just if you decide to kind of ballpark it, proportionally, what would be the amount of callouts that are responding to a person in a known location, who is somehow stranded or incapacitated or injured in some way, versus actually looking for someone whose location is unknown?

Jenn Sparks:

I'd say more people that are incapacitated and called in. We have a few missing persons. This, we're coming into hunting season and there's always overdue hunters, missing hunters, which usually it turns out, knock on wood, to be just an overdue hunter that may be lost or was dealing with the animal that's killed and they're overdue. But I would say percentage wise, probably 70% are known location, just missing people.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, okay, interesting. You kind of have to wonder if that proportion is going to kind of continue to change, as communication in the back country expands. You know, with folks who have satellite communicators and GPS devices and they know where they are but they just are stuck, versus that same person 20 years ago might have been in a mountain biking accident and also been missing, because they couldn't communicate to tell anyone where they were.

Jenn Sparks:

Sure. Just ironically, in the last two weeks, we had two spot device activation rescues that turned out to be false, or just somebody had activated the spot without knowing it.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Oh, interesting.

Jenn Sparks:

Which we have to respond to regardless, because that's why you have a spot device.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Right. But recently, you had two that were false alarms, so to speak?

Jenn Sparks:

Yes, in one week.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Were the folks... in one week, oh my gosh... were the folks surprised when suddenly a bunch of search and rescue volunteers descended on them?

Jenn Sparks:

So, in a spot activation, we try to track down the information before we deploy the whole team.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Good.

Jenn Sparks:

We did have one last year, that was in a very remote location and they sent a helicopter in and the woman was in her tent, "What's going on?"

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Oh, my goodness.

Jenn Sparks:

"Why you here?"

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, "Hey, I came out for some peace and quiet."

Jenn Sparks:

Yes. She had kept her spot device in her sleeping bag, to keep it warm and had rolled on it and set it off.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay.

Jenn Sparks:

It happens.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, absolutely. That's pretty interesting, though. So, I guess keep your thumbs away from your spots and your garments and all that unless you really need them.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, you mentioned earlier that there's good cooperation between your team and then the teams for the national parks themselves. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that looks like? Is that just training coordination, I mean, that's actually working together on call outs. What does the relationship look like, between your team and other search rescue teams?

Jenn Sparks:

So, we do a lot of cross training with the park and our short haul team. I'm not part of our short haul team. We have each other's backs on the short haul aspect of it, they train together for that. But we collaborate and cooperate with not only Grand Teton National Park but with the sheriff's office, Jacksonville Mount Resort, the Forest Service, like I said, BLM, so it's great to do a fire with EMS, which is our local, our EMS team as well.

Jenn Sparks:

It's great to train with them just to see how each team works and to try to have the most successful rescue, which we don't get to do as much as I would like to, collaborations with these other teams. But when you do, it's always like a high five, like ah, it's so great to work with you guys.

Jenn Sparks:

So, we do some interagency training once in a while. And each team, we always invite people to train with us, whoever the park, et cetera, they're always invited to come join the training, if they can.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Oh, that's great.

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah. So, that's nice as far as getting to know a name and a face and what their abilities are. I think that's probably it. I think we probably work closest... Actually, that's not true. We work with Jacksonville Mountain Resort ski patrol quite a bit-

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Oh, okay.

Jenn Sparks:

because the access in the back country. We do a lot of rescues because the gates are open, and if you are familiar with the Jacksonville Mount Resort, if somebody skis out of bounds on the south side, it's technically our rescue. If it's on the north side, it's Grand Teton National Park.

Jenn Sparks:

And so, if somebody goes out of the gates and skis into Granite Canyon and gets hurt, we will work together. But that's a park... technically in the national park.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, same mountain. Wow, fascinating. Real quick, for folks who aren't familiar with the term short haul, would you describe a short haul operation to us?

Jenn Sparks:

Sure. That's when a helicopter comes, somebody who's hanging underneath the helicopter or one of our teammates, they get inserted into a difficult terrain area, assess the situation... The helicopter pilot will put that person down, our team assesses the situation, packages the patient, the helicopter will come back and pick up the patient and our teammate.

Jenn Sparks:

And again, they're hanging underneath the helicopter and bringing them to a safe location. So, it's a very specialized, specific type of training. You obviously have to be comfortable with hanging underneath the allowed helicopter and it's always cold. But it's actually an amazing tool that our team is really proficient in. It's very technical, it's safe, but it's also gets you into locations that are... Sorry.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

That's fine, pup sounds.

Jenn Sparks:

Puts you into terrain that might take hours to access on foot or on snowmobile or on mountain bike or Razor. So, it's been a process but we have it pretty proficient right now and our short haul team trains with Grand Teton National Park, so everyone's on the same page. Everyone who works has the same protocol.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah. That seems very important, but also, man, what a game changer when that tool became available for search and rescue.

Jenn Sparks:

Right.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah. So, you talk about interactions with other teams sort of in the same terrain. Do you guys ever go on mutual aid callouts outside the county? Or are you kind of so busy in Teton that your focus area really stays to the county itself?

Jenn Sparks:

For the most part, it's mostly Teton County, but again, we're so close to Fremont County or some of the surrounding counties, if they need additional support and help, we are there for them, for sure. And vice versa. So for example, Rodeo Wall is in Lincoln County, but it's much closer for us to respond, our search and rescue team, versus Lincoln Counties because it's literally right on the border.

Jenn Sparks:

So, that's an example of where we might help with that rescue or we might just do that rescue. In addition, Teton Canyon, which is like Table Mountain, et cetera, we've had a lot of rescues over there, but it's like an hour and a half for us to get there. So, sometimes, we'll work with Teton County, Idaho rescue team to assess the situation and maybe both respond to that call out, that rescue.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, no, I mean that's a good reminder that the terrain itself, the topography of the land could have a lot more to do with accessibility than where a county line happens to lie across it all. So, good to have that kind of established relationship and be able to move nimbly when life is on the line. So, that's great to hear.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Any particularly memorable moments you'd be willing to share with us, from your tenure on the team? I'm sure you've seen and done quite a lot over the years, but anything that sticks out, either from just working with the team or on a call out itself, any poignant memories you'd be willing to chat about?

Jenn Sparks:

I mean, there's been so many rescues over the last numerous years. Again, the whole team is like a family, so we always come back to the hanger, debrief and talk about what happened.

Jenn Sparks:

Some of them are tougher than others, some of them are... I mean we joked the other day that not every rescue is like, "Oh my God, it was hours of humping in the woods and bears and helicopters and snowmobiles." Some are just basic, a twisted ankle on Snow King, which is still interesting.

Jenn Sparks:

But some of the more difficult ones have been maybe... We had a gentleman, a local gentleman that was mauled by a bear, a couple years ago that was a really difficult rescue. Just... everything about it, communications were hard, we didn't have a helicopter readily available, we didn't know where the person was, the guy was local, the client was not.

Jenn Sparks:

And it was just sort of an unknown. We weren't able to reach the guy that evening, so, it was all these questions in our mind, "Is he still alive? Is he doing okay? Did we leave him out?" And then, of course there was a bear in the area that was... a horrible bear that had mauled a person.

Jenn Sparks:

So, there was that in the back of your mind and scary. I would say someone in the last, I think it was probably two years ago, we had a hunter up in the Gros Ventres. That was a really long, difficult rescue, but the outcome was amazing.

Jenn Sparks:

And to think back, he maybe wouldn't have made it if we hadn't done our magic. And it worked so hard, as a team. There was a team of us that hiked in a couple hours to get to him. The weather was bad, the helicopter couldn't fly in, he was having really hard medical distress, it was cold, it was snowing. He was a little bit older and we did everything and we packaged him and started the transport out and we had this miraculous 10 minute window where the helicopter was able to fly in and pick him up.

Jenn Sparks:

But this was after hours of, in the back of our minds, we're like, "He might not make it to the trailhead." And so, that was a really great... one of those where the helicopters took off and we're sort of all hugging and high fiving each other and like, "Wow, we really just saved that guy's life." And we did save his life, he was sort of touch and go.

Jenn Sparks:

I'd say in the last couple years we had some weird rescues that we don't necessarily, or we don't usually deal with. Like some suicides, which were super sad and it was hard to deal with the family. We had Gabby Petito, that's not really in our wheelhouse, but we helped with that rescue. And our team was the one that ended up finding her.

Jenn Sparks:

So, that was working with people we don't normally work with, like the FBI. And so that was... I wouldn't say it was memorable, it was more like that's not something we normally deal with.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, like a case that has that degree of national attention, right in your own backyard. That would be pretty surreal, I would imagine.

Jenn Sparks:

What's always interesting, though, is when somebody comes up to you months or years later and said, "Oh gosh, you rescued me," or saved me, and you're out of character, you're out of uniform... how did you recognize me?

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Right.

Jenn Sparks:

It's just happened to me the other day, at the grocery store. Someone came up to me and like, "Oh, you're Jenn, you rescued me a couple years ago." And I just want to think-

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Oh, my gosh.

Jenn Sparks:

like, I don't know how you recognize me because I certainly didn't recognize...

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Well, you were there on the most memorable day of their life-

Jenn Sparks:

Right.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Probably, you know? And they were there on a, I don't want to say run of the mill day of yours, but certainly, a little bit more of a common occurrence. But that's incredible, that's got to feel absolutely amazing. Yeah.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Random question. Have you ever, in your team history, do you think you've ever had someone who went from being a patient or subject to being a team member, later?

Jenn Sparks:

Yes, we have. We've had... And some people are inspired by when and after they get rescued. We've had two or three teammates that have been rescued are now our current teammates.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Amazing.

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah, so...

Kristin Oxford, Host:

They're like, "I see firsthand how important this is and now I want to be part of it." But of course, like you mentioned, some rescues or recoveries I would imagine, in particular, are difficult.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, what do you guys do as a team or what do you do individually, but I would imagine a lot of this happens as a team to cope with the stress and the difficulty of this kind of work?

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah, so we've been working really hard in the last several years on not only psychological first aid, but stress injuries, that people may encounter post or during a rescue. And it's been a big push for us to take care of ourselves mentally and focus on wellness and how our team is doing in that arena.

Jenn Sparks:

So, like I mentioned before, when we finish a rescue, regardless if it's a twisted ankle on Snow King or if it's a really hard recovery, body recovery, we always debrief. And that's a chance to sort of say, like, "What could we have done differently? How did we do? When was your, 'Oh shit,' moment?" whatever it looks like.

Jenn Sparks:

But we also have little pods that we work with, that we check in with each other after a difficult rescue just to say, "Hey, how are you doing? What do you need? Let's go for a cup of coffee, let's go for a walk," or, "Do you need to talk about it?"

Jenn Sparks:

And it's hard of for some people to come around, but I think our team knows it's really important, to work through some of those difficulties post a rescue. And PTSD is a real thing, and sometimes it's difficult for individuals to recognize that's what's happening, but that's why the team, we're really keen on making sure each other are working it out and have each other's backs, checking in on each other.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

No, I mean that's so great to hear and so important. And I think, especially in spaces like this where you can associate with your strength and your toughness, because you're doing something like search and rescue, which is pretty incredible... It's got to be hard for some folks to ask for help.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, to have a systematized way of making sure that you're checking in with each other, I think is such a nimble and graceful way of dealing with that. It's just a process. It's just normalized to be there for each other.

Jenn Sparks:

And everyone deals differently with it. But it is important for each of us to recognize, we are teammates and we need to check in with each other and make sure everyone's doing okay.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah. Well and to call back to something you said far earlier, you said one of main things, skills you need to have, is to be a good teammate. It's not really the case that you want individuals who are going to run up a mountain and throw someone over their shoulder and run down.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

You have to be kind of a cog in the machine, in a way. And to play your role, be a good teammate, now, nobody's trying to be the hero. And I think part of that, of course, is taking care of each other throughout a callout and then, afterward.

Jenn Sparks:

Exactly. We ask everyone to take off their expert halo.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Ha!

Jenn Sparks:

How do we show up at a real-

Kristin Oxford, Host:

It's well put. Their expert halo, I love that. Yeah, perfect. You mentioned earlier your reasons for joining the team in the first place, but what are your reasons for staying on the team? What's your favorite part about being on the team?

Jenn Sparks:



My teammates, first and foremost. It's like a family. We count on each other. I mean, to be honest, I have seen some places in this valley I never thought I would go to. I mean, I always take the time and the opportunity to look around and be like, "Wow, this is going to be a really amazing trail run, next week."

Jenn Sparks:

The trainings are amazing, the skill sets that you learn. I mean that's not anything... It's your accumulation of training in our rally. Other reasons to stay, it's exciting. I mean we train hard, when the pager goes off and you can't go on rescue, it's, you're sort of like, "Oh, what's going on?"

Jenn Sparks:

I've been to the last six trainings and now I can't go to these three rescues, because I'm out of town or busy or work, you know, family obligations, et cetera. And just knowing that we are giving back to the community and it's a necessary resource that we're providing, to people living in the valley.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, I mean it's really... Gosh, to wax philosophical here for a second, it really is a beautiful human thing that on what could be the worst day of someone's life, a bunch of strangers who have other jobs and families and lives are willing to drop everything and go help. That's a beautiful thing that we humans have constructed for one another.

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah, I know the community appreciates all the hard work we're doing, and they've been super supportive through not only monetarily, but just support from what, if I wear my coat going into the grocery store, somebody's like, "Oh, thank you for all you do." Wow, that's really nice.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, let's say from a search and rescue perspective, do you have any advice for folks adventuring in the back country?

Jenn Sparks:

Yes. First and foremost, tell somebody where you're going, even if it's your backyard. Sometimes it's a needle in a haystack when someone calls and says, "My wife went a hike and she's overdue. I think she went on Teton Pass." That's hard.

Jenn Sparks:

So, tell somebody where you're going. Be prepared, as far as your basic ski day that you're anticipating being out one or two hours could turn into 24 hours. So, make sure you have things in your pack that you might not ever use, but you want to know they're there. Fire starter, warmth, a puffy, a med kit, and be ready to self rescues if needed. That's always a good thing.

Jenn Sparks:

Know where you are. Our team created Backcountry SOS, which is an app on our phone, it's free and it's really easy to download and you don't need to sign up. And it basically walks you through, if you are

injured or missing or lost, and it barely needs any cell service, it just walks you through on, and it sends 911 your location and your coordinates.

Jenn Sparks:

If you walk, it probably takes two minutes to do the whole thing, so if you break your leg and you are in the Gros Ventres and nobody knows where you are, you just bring up your app and it walks you through, "Where are you, what happened?" And it sends off a quick text to, cell service wise.

Jenn Sparks:

So, that's interesting, everyone should know that, everyone should have that loaded on their phone. I've taught my daughter and all of her friends how to use it, just a good thing to have,. Like I said, be prepared, sort of know your limits, stay within them.

Jenn Sparks:

And sometimes you get out of your limits and that's okay, that's why search and rescue exists. You know, we're not here to judge. I've never judged any of our patients or our victims, and when I start judging people, it's time for me to leave the team.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

One of our local search and rescue teams up in the area that I'm recording my piece from today, Gallatin County Search and Rescue team, they are often doing outreach to just encourage people to use the resource of the team. They're like, "We don't want people to feel shame or embarrassed about needing us. We exist for this reason. Call us, we're here."

Jenn Sparks:

Yeah. I was just going to say, along those lines, you should call, don't wait until 11:30 at night, to make that phone call, when you've known since 4:00 in the afternoon that you're in trouble. We want to come rescue. That's why we train and that's why we're prepared and that's why we practice and we are here, for you.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Right, yeah. And you'd probably rather go at 4:00 PM as opposed to 11:30 PM, if you had the opportunity.

Jenn Sparks:

It's usually the 11 o'clock, Sunday night, really cold, blowing windy, when people call and say, "Hey, I think I'm lost." Okay.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah. That's when they're finally, finally convinced of their own predicament.

Jenn Sparks:

Right.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Sure. The Greater Yellowstone Coalition is a conservation organization and we are, of course, interested in stories from across the landscape, whether they're specifically conservation focused or not. But you personally are engaged in conservation work through your other volunteer positions, as well.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

So, we're going to ask you the same question we ask all of our guests, which is, do you have a conservation hero? And this could be someone from your daily life or a famous author. Any answer is acceptable.

Jenn Sparks:

Conservation hero, let's see... I mean, of course, there's always Mardy Murie, she was amazing and she was an inspiration for many people and in particular women. She was ahead of her time.

Jenn Sparks:

I would say, locally, there's so many people in Jackson that make it their mission to make sure that open space is available. For example, the Land Trust alone spends, that's what their mission is, is to have that connectivity and have that migration corridor.

Jenn Sparks:

I would say people... There are plenty of people in Jackson Hole, locally, that conservation is their big biggest mission here. I don't think I could pinpoint one person.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, absolutely. You know, you live in a very remarkable place and that is why people want to live there, visit, move, all that. And then, if they get in trouble in the process of trying to enjoy all that beautiful, great outdoor space, then you will meet them when they do.

Jenn Sparks:

That's right.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

All right, final, and I think probably the most important question of this entire podcast, Jenn, what's your favorite knot?

Jenn Sparks:

My favorite knot? Ooh, okay. Well, there's so many. When I first joined the team, many years ago, we had to be able to do a figure eight behind our back, with our eyes closed.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Wow.

Jenn Sparks:

I would not say that's my favorite knot, but I do love the butterfly knot. That's a good one. Yeah, that's useful in any situation, even if it's just hanging your food in the back country, when you're camping. It's really easy to do, I love the name. I can do that with my eyes closed.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Jenn, thank you so much for coming on the podcast. We really appreciate it, it's great to hear your stories and of course, thank you so much for all that you do to give back to your community and the ecosystem, as a whole.

Jenn Sparks:

Well, thanks Kristin, and I really appreciated talking to the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. You guys do amazing work, and I'm really proud to be a team member and a longtime team member on Teton County Search and Rescue.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Thank you, Jenn, for sharing your story with us and for all you do, as a search and rescue volunteer and active community member. We also want to send out a big thank you to all search and rescue folks in Greater Yellowstone and beyond. Your efforts are crucial to helping keep us safe as we explore and stay connected to the natural world.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Remember, there are many ways safety and conservation overlap. By using established trails, you can stay oriented while reducing your impact on the landscape around you. By carrying your bear spray and recreating with a friend or two, you can avoid run-ins with wildlife that can endanger both you and the animal in question. Have a plan, be prepared, tell someone where you're going, pay attention to your surroundings... And if you do get in over your head, call for help.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Listeners, some of you have been asking how else you can support the Voices of Greater Yellowstone Podcast. Besides making a donation to the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, another awesome way to help us reach new people and tell more stories is to review us on Apple Podcasts, iTunes or Spotify, if that's how you tune in. Or, you can simply tell a friend about us. We appreciate any and all love you can share.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

The Voices of Greater Yellowstone Podcast is produced by the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, a nonprofit dedicated to working with all people to protect the lands, waters, and wildlife of this special ecosystem. Thank you for joining us today, and we look forward to seeing you next time.