

Safety Lessons Learned—Garlic Mustard Removal

“Lessons Learned” is a proven method of sharing important safety messages. Based upon real-life incidents, Lessons Learned examines root causes of why an accident or injury happened, and identifies corrective actions or mitigation to reduce the chance of future accidents. Lessons Learned does not identify people by name, nor is it finger-pointing or a way to place blame. It is an honest assessment of a chain of events that helps us find proactive ways to keep us all safer, healthier, and out on the Trail.

The Activity: Many volunteers assist with pulling garlic mustard. In 2024 two different volunteers sustained First Aid injuries while pulling garlic mustard just days apart, and for different reasons.

What Happened: The first volunteer was stooping over to pick garlic mustard and was poked in the eye by a stiff weed stem, causing prolonged double vision but ultimately requiring no physician treatment.

Not many days after that, a second volunteer was pulling garlic mustard while walking on uneven surfaces with many branches and vines on the terrain. The volunteer tripped and fell, causing bruises, scratches, and bleeding to the chin. Again, no physician treatment was required.

The Lessons Learned:

- These may seem like very minor injuries, but everyone can agree they could have very easily been much more serious. Being poked in the eye with a sharp, stiff object can as easily result in permanent deterioration or loss of vision if the portion of the eye being impacted is only millimeters different than the spot resulting in prolonged double-vision. Trips and falls that cause abrasion and bruising can just as easily result in debilitating musculoskeletal injuries, unconsciousness, or worse.
- Were there morning safety briefings provided to these volunteers discussing safety eyewear and cautions about the most statistically common injury—slips, trips, and falls?
- Were the volunteers “regulars” who have performed this task many times without incident in the past? Was everyone on the crew treating this work event as a potentially hazardous work environment, or simply going through the motions because nothing bad ever happened before?
- In Lesson #4 of *Trail Safe!*, we learn about “perception of risk.” Most of us wouldn’t consider pulling garlic mustard as a risky activity—and it isn’t when we treat it as an activity with **known** risks that can be very easily **mitigated** with eye protection and attention to footing. It’s when complacency takes over and we disregard simple hazard mitigation that we place ourselves at **unnecessary risk**.

- In Lesson #1 of *Trail Safe!*, we also learn that, statistically, the majority of our most catastrophic NPS injuries and even fatalities happen to our most experienced workers. It may be “just pulling garlic mustard,” but how close did two of our veteran volunteers come to loss of sight and/or a truly debilitating blow to the skull or spinal injury from a fall onto uneven surfaces over such a low-risk activity?
- Remember the value in using the SPE/GAR risk assessment tool that has been provided to all volunteers upon completion of *Trail Safe!* Does the value of the mission outweigh the calculated risks of working in terrain that is uneven, and cluttered with branches and vines? What can be done to mitigate those risks to “As Low As Reasonably Practical (ALRP)” and make the Gain outweigh the Risk?
- The Lessons Learned here are as obvious as they are simple: Any activity has the potential for risk; known risk can be mitigated; disregard for risk can result in injury—no matter how “safe” the task is.

Thank you to everyone for not only building and caring for the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, but for also working together to keep each other safe and healthy along the way. Be Trail Safe!