

Safety Lessons Learned—Swamper Awareness

“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: Working with chainsaws is a common activity along the Ice Age Trail, and arguably comes with more potential risks than any other volunteer task. This is equally true for those who are assisting sawyers as “swampers” to remove slash and bucked materials. The following is an Ice Age Trail example of a Near Miss accident which could have easily resulted in serious injury.

What Happened: A sawyer was limbing a downed tree, and per important safety guidance, was taking the time to engage the chain break each time he repositioned himself along the trunk of the tree to make more cuts on the limbs. An over-eager swamper walked into the chainsaw bar at one of those moments, and would have surely suffered serious harm if the sawyer hadn’t been correctly engaging the chain break between uses. Earlier in the day, another person on the crew had warned that same swamper to slow down and let the sawyers do their work safely before jumping in to pull away cut limbs.

The Lessons Learned: There are a number of things that came into play in the course of events leading up to this Near Miss—some positive, some negative:

- First of all: What went right? Obviously, the actions of the sawyer to engage the chain break was the last line of defense, and the only thing that kept the swamper from being seriously harmed. Safety practices such as these are in place for a reason. Sawyers may work for many hours—perhaps even a lifetime—without benefitting from an engaged chain break, but you never know when an incident like this may happen and the only way it works out well in the long run for everyone involved is for the operator to always follow every safety protocol, every time. Good job!
- Please review Lesson #3 of *Trail Safe!* (Error and Accident Causation) to see how the safe practices of the sawyer helped avoid a tragedy within the “Domino Theory.”
- Now: What went wrong? Swampers play as critical a safety role as the sawyer. They are there to assist the sawyer, not to be an additional risk factor taking away from the sawyer’s concentration. Assertive Communication (Lesson #8 of *Trail Safe!*) is essential. First, assertive communication helps ensure that the swamper knows exactly how he or she is to assist. Secondly, if things aren’t working out, assertive communication should be used to Stop Work until the issue is corrected.
- Just as importantly as assertive communication, individuals need to have an awareness of how they personally perceive risk. Helping to drag limbs away from a sawyer has the

same potential for injury as when a tree is being felled. The swamper that day either didn't realize he or she was working in a dangerous setting, or perhaps did know and disregarded the risk anyway. Review *Trail Safe!* Lesson #5 for information on diminished awareness, and Lesson #6 which examines "complacency errors" vs "skills errors."

- Lastly, how much of a role did the swamper's personality trait play that day? In Lesson #7 of *Trail Safe!*, we learn about the five basic human personality traits and how each one can go too far, or not far enough, in how we perceive risk and react to it. Let's all take a moment to review that Lesson and become a bit more self-aware on what impact we may be having on ourselves and others.

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!