

MOURNE RAMBLING GROUP

Guidelines for Leaders

The following is a list of ideas and suggestions, which may be helpful when leading a walk. It does not pretend to be comprehensive.

Background Information

The basic task is to be in control of the group without spoiling their enjoyment. In leading, there is rarely a perfect answer. You do not have to be forcing the pace from the front all the time or continually be at the back with the slowest member. At all costs do not let others dictate the route or pace. You have to learn to make your own judgements, allowing for the personalities and abilities of those present. The more experience you can gain, the more you are liable to feel at home leading a group. That means both walking in different areas and gleaning information from more experienced people. You are strongly encouraged to attend courses such as First Aid/Mountain Emergency, Navigation, Leadership and refresher courses which are organised by the club.

Preparation – Prior to the Walk

- Get a weather forecast and adjust the route if necessary e.g. cold weather could mean two short lunch stops instead of one longer one. Our website recommends several weather sites.
- Liaise with other leaders if seriously adverse weather conditions may require a change in starting point or walk arrangements. Endeavour to communicate with other leaders by e-mail.
- Plan your route – work out total distance, height gained, how long it will take and work out escape routes. Learn as much about the area as possible.
- Complete the relevant sections of the Route Planner (or Detailed Route card) and Risk Assessment form.
- Make sure you pack your map, mobile phone, compass, whistle, bivvy bag or blizzard bag, head torch, spare batteries, first aid kit, first aid forms (Action in Emergency, Casualty Check card, Mountain Rescue card) and pencil.
- You may wish to consider carrying an emergency shelter, and GPS.
- Find out the route which other leaders are taking on the day.
- Check that you have mobile numbers of other leaders.
- Check that you have numbers for emergency services.
- Identify points in the walk where you may have to regulate the pace of the group e.g., Steep ascents, major river crossings.

Before Starting the Walk

- Make it clear that you are the leader – this is particularly important if there are people out for the first time.
- Check with other group leaders before starting out to minimise problems of group size and to outline the routes which their respective groups will follow.
- Avoid groups combining if one of the leaders has not turned up. Joint walks can prove very unsatisfactory to both groups as well as making leadership more difficult.
- No group must exceed 15. In the event of there being more than 15 some walkers could move to another group that has less than 15. If this is not an option the group must be

split (with no group less than 4) and a volunteer leader (or leaders) will be required. Two people sharing the leadership of the new group might be a more forthcoming solution.

- If there are new members out for the first time, check that they have been in contact with one of the New Members Officer. It is the policy of the club that potential members should make this contact so that we can eliminate as far as possible people appearing who are ill equipped or are not fit for the level of walk they choose. Indicate to them approximately how long the walk will take and the height gained so that they are fully aware and do not take on more than they are capable of and check you have their details in case of emergency
- HOWEVER - Leaders do have discretion where a potential member turns up, who is clearly experienced and properly equipped, to include them in the group.
- Brief the group regarding the route and any potential hazards, especially if there is scrambling involved, based on your risk assessment.
- Chat to the people out for the first time, make them welcome and advise them about staying with the group and following the leader. Point out that if they leave the group the leader is no longer responsible for them.
- If someone turns up inadequately dressed/equipped you have the right and duty of care to say they cannot come on the walk as you cannot accept responsibility for them.
- In poor conditions make it clear to members the importance of remaining close together; appoint a back marker who realises s/he must alert you (by an agreed means of visual communication) if there is a problem.
- It is a good idea for each leader to carry a mobile phone which contains the names and mobile phone numbers of all our leaders. Most leaders are happy that other leaders have these numbers which, of course, must be kept confidential. A list of leaders' mobile phone numbers is available from the Secretary or Treasurer.
- The leader should keep his/her mobile phone switched on and in a suitable handy place. Please remember to fully charge up the mobile phone battery the evening before the walk.
- Reassure new joiners and walkers returning from injury/absence that the pace of the walk can be adjusted to meet their needs.
- Before the walk, the leader should establish the method of communication with the front and back of the group (back marker), a system for stopping those at the front (such as raised poles) and for the back marker to signal that there are difficulties.

During the Walk

- Monitor the condition of group members by regular visual checks and tactful questioning
- Assess the reaction of those at the back of the group by falling back when it is safe to do so and by questioning the back marker.
- Use drink/lunch breaks to discuss pace and get feedback
- Prepare for steep ascents by advising the group of any planned breaks in the climb.
- These should be kept to a minimum and aimed at providing short recovery time to any walker who may be feeling strain.
- During steep ascents, and in good conditions, the leader may encourage stronger walkers to move ahead of the group at their own pace, having specified a gathering point (eg rock, summit cairn, wall) and whether they should keep within calling distance.
- It is not necessary for the leaders always to be at the front of the group. In good conditions, being in the middle of the group enables contact with the front and back. If

someone is clearly feeling the strain at the back of the group, the leader may drop back to check if there is a real problem.

- During steep ascents the leader may inform the group that there will be one or more rest points to recover and bring the group together.
- In poor conditions, take time to take bearings and work out timings. Ask for confirmation from someone else in the group.
- During the walk, be as democratic as possible but you must take the final decisions. If someone wants to do their own thing, make it clear to them they are not part of the group and you are not responsible for them.
- Do not assume everyone can do what you can – they may not have the same head for heights or be as confident at scrambling.
- If someone attempts to force the pace, continually “leads” the walk, make it clear to them why you are stopping or the importance of stopping on occasions to let the group assemble. Make it clear that pushing ahead is not an option unless sanctioned by the leader with a definite visible feature stated.
- In good weather you do not always have to be at the front, but in poor visibility you must lead from the front.
- Regularly check the members, the condition of your group and, where required, offer advice, point out dangerous conditions – gullies, streams etc.
- Adjust lunch stops according to weather conditions and condition of group; some of the less fit may prefer a longer stop, but weather conditions may dictate otherwise.
- In case of an accident, follow the procedures outlined in the Action in Emergency Card and if necessary complete the Casualty Check Card and Mountain Rescue Card.
- Report the accident as soon as possible to the chairperson.
- If there is a scramble, make it optional. **Don't enter a gully unless you have experience of leading in gullies.** Going down steep slopes or a gully, make sure that everyone knows the “below” call and how to crouch with their head down and rucksack uppermost. The group can be split for that section – (say a maximum of four). Keep everyone close and don't let people go on to their bottoms, as stones will get dislodged. Zig-Zag where possible to minimise the height difference between first and last.
- Be aware of our environmental advice to walkers and lead by example i.e. use stiles where available rather than crossing walls or fences: avoid taking short cuts on zig-zag paths as this creates new lines for run-off of water and increases erosion. If you must use an eroded route, walk along the centre of the path if possible to avoid widening the damage. If this is not possible keep at least 10m away from the eroded route. Avoid walking on the Mourne wall. If necessary remind walkers about leaving no litter - even biodegradable items like banana skins, orange peel and teabags take years to disappear.

After the walk

- Ensure that any accidents are reported to the Chairman and that Route Cards are retained for 2 years.
- Obtain feedback on group feelings about the overall pace of the walk

Further Suggestions

- We recommend you read the following
 - Mountain Navigation ISBN 1-871890-55-1 (Peter Cliff)
 - Hill Walking (Steve Long) – especially sections on Weather and Dealing with Injuries.
 - Navigation in the Mountains by Carlo Forte

- The Ultimate Navigation Manual by Lyle Brotherton
- If you are new to leading, make use of your mentor so that you can build up your skills, learn from their advice and broaden your experience.