

Sweep Duties

Sweeps are 2nd in command on hikes and are always at the back of the pack. Sometimes sweeps are 'off-duty' hike leaders, sometimes they are experienced hikers that are happy to help but don't want to be leaders, and in other instances, they are leaders-in-training. A hike leader may pre-arrange a sweep before a hike or sweeps may be 'known quantities' that have signed-up for the hike and are appointed at the trail head (TH) by the leader.

At the TH, both the sweep and leader take head-counts to determine the number of hikers in the group. Periodically, the sweep should count to confirm that all hikers are within sight. The sweep can facilitate communication by learning as many names as possible in the back half of the group. Hikers may find the sweep more approachable than the leader and need to be open to that possibility.

On the usual hike, the 2 most important jobs of a sweep are to make sure that all of the group members are accounted for and to monitor individual hikers for a brewing problem. Being attentive to the group and paying attention are usually all that is needed of a sweep. The sweep can chat like they normally would do on a club hike but always be surveying the larger scene and keeping track of the pack.

Both the leader and the sweep should frequently study the faces of the hikers to monitor how they are doing. Many people will habitually reply "Fine" when asked how they are doing but a red face or limp may tell a different story that could impact the group. Dragging poles, going quiet, or wobbling can be warning signs of a failing hiker.

The sweep may need to signal the leader to stop to allow an ailing hiker to tend to their needs or be tended to or to sponsor a rest break for the group. The sweep might shout at the leader or ask to have the request passed through the line to the leader, or use a walkie talkie if available. Sharing cell numbers between the leader and sweep before the hike may allow making a call to the other. Looking towards each other on switchbacks is a great habit for leaders and sweeps to develop so that they can discretely communicate.

In an emergency situation, a sweep may take over for the hike leader. The hike leader may have a personal issue, the hike leader might be preoccupied with an injured hiker, or the group may need to be split into two with the sweep taking charge of the 2nd group for safety reasons. Hike leaders generally avoid splitting a group in half because of pace mis-matches but other situations may make it appropriate.

The sweep should know the route well enough to walk a hiker back to their car OR have sufficient route-finding skills that they are confident that they can backtrack if on an unfamiliar trail.

Usually, the sweep is inconspicuous, just another hiker that seemingly lags at the back. But the sweep is identified and acknowledged by the leader at the TH and maintains communication with the hike leader. If it's a large group hiking on a single-file only trail, the hike leader needs to periodically pause the hike so that the sweep can meet face-to-face with the hike leader to apprise the leader of any brewing problems.

The sweep may report on:
...a non-compliant hiker

...a struggling hiker that might need to be walked out
...issues with the pace, either too slow or too fast
...the need for a break
...complaints about the hike leader

“Bio-breaks” by hikers are usually managed by the sweep. Club policy is that if a hiker needs to step off of the trail for a bio break that they notify the leader or the sweep, who then notifies the other. The group usually advances a bit to give the hiker privacy, as does the sweep. If the leader takes the group on to a better stopping place, the sweep stays back, closer to the hiker. The sweep advances a bit to grant privacy but lingers nearby until the hiker is underway again. The sweep may suggest that the hiker mark their exit point from the group’s trail with crossed poles or another object. It’s best not to have them leave their pack behind as a marker.

Like being a hike leader, being a sweep is a generous, voluntary gift to the club. If you do not want to sweep for a given leader for ANY reason, decline. You are under no obligation to fill their request—none!

If you want to update your first aid or CPR skills, check redcross.org for online classes. The club does not require hike leaders or sweeps to have first aid or CPR training certificates.