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Good luck turns up twice
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—We had two pieces of good luck last week, which is way above what we expect in March.

Rain was predicted daily between Tuesday and Sunday. With snow still high on the mountains and the ground saturated from the melting, that amount of water would have washed a good chunk of Blue Grass down the Potomac River and into the Chesapeake Bay.

We've gritted our teeth through three 100-year floods since 1985. Before then, no one could recall floods like that. Forested slopes held water, but hillside pastures turned into granite countertops and sheeted water into their bottoms.

The memory of that dense, protracted rain hangs around like a pop-up ad that you can't make go away. We lost property and lives. One farmer rescued a family clinging to a flood-surrounded tree in the middle of the night. Then, all were lost when his big tractor fell into a black hole that he couldn't see.

The 1985 flood rose on November 4th and 5th, an odd time for rain that heavy. I remember the dates, because Melissa was 50 miles from home, holed up in an Econo Lodge, nine months pregnant. She was one of the last to be allowed out of the county and had driven our pickup through water -- at times up to its headlights -- to get to her exam.

Four mountains and impassable roads separated us when we finally got a phone call through. I told her to sit tight and not start anything until I got to her. She used to listen to me before she went to law school.

Two days later, I drove over a highway that was totally gone in a dozen spots, and Molly appeared two days after that.

We were lucky back then. Had we known more about the road conditions she faced, she would have canceled her check up. And Molly might have been the county's first home delivery in 50 years.

We were lucky again last week: no downpour and no flooding.

And then we lucked out on something else.

Melissa had a reunion of her college buddies scheduled for Friday through Sunday. Three women showed up. The fourth, a biology professor with a

British accent driving east from Huntington, West Virginia, disappeared.

Just west of Blue Grass lies a rugged mountainous area that includes a 10,000-acre portion of the George Washington National Forest. Called Laurel Fork, it's mostly roadless, save for an east-west, switchback dirt lane over three 4,000-foot-high ridges. No one lives there at this time of year. The mountains snag precipitation, probably 200 inches worth of snow this winter.

Over the years, I've led a local group, Friends of Laurel Fork, that has encouraged the Forest Service to manage it primarily for conservation values. It's not a genuine wilderness, but it sure isn't Times Square.

Three minutes away from her destination, Melissa's friend made a wrong turn. She drove west on the Laurel Fork road and hung up in a snow bank, from which a withdrawal was not possible.

She was about seven miles from the nearest inhabited dwelling, in the dark, in a heavy rain, without cell service, by herself, with a small flashlight and without anyone knowing where she was or what had happened.

She told me later that she'd stopped following Melissa's written instructions (which required her reading glasses) and had switched to her voice GPS, thus allowing her to drive efficiently and with confidence...in the wrong direction.

I've found road-direction systems to be of hit-and-miss reliability in rural areas. A quirky left turn and a funny road number faked out hers. A three-dollar dashboard compass might have saved her, or sticking with the written directions. Or a fold-out paper!!!!map.

She walked west for several miles, but turned back when she found nothing. She backtracked east, but found no help there either.

No one was likely to drive this road until the weather broke, a week or more away. She didn't know it, but she was on her own.

She kept her head and slept in the van. She watched a DVD to drown out the pounding of the all-night rain—which saved her. By morning, it had melted enough snow to allow her to dig out and drive off.

The long night of uncertainty had weighed heavier on her friends than sleeping in the middle of nowhere had weighed on her.

This could have easily turned out badly. Had the snow kept her van locked up, she would have faced walking out—a serious hike even on a dry, sunny July 4th. None of us would have thought to look for her back there. A slip on the ice, an ankle break, could have doomed her. She never knew how close to

the edge she was.

Every physical place contains embedded dangers. The ones that usually catch us are those we don't understand or choose to ignore. As long as we know the risks, we have a shot at not getting clobbered. We can't avoid all harm, but some, certainly.

Luck, like stuff, happens. It's not earned. It's not an entitlement. It's not equitably distributed. It can't be managed, and it often doesn't show up when you really need it.

I don't know many individuals who have run through life's raindrops without getting wet. And those who have good fortune and finish pretty dry may not feel that blessed. My grandmother's advice on this matter remains sound: "Take a hat."

Luck, like money, feels differently, depending on whether it's going in your direction or against. Economists know that consumer buying is more influenced by a price hike than a price cut of the same magnitude. We feel the pain of money lost more than the joy of money gained. The same is true of luck: Bad luck hurts more than good luck feels nice.

Blue Grass avoided a flood in 2010 through no actions of our own. And Melissa's college chum rose to an occasion of her own making.

We could be on a roll, but I wouldn't count on it. It never hurts to take a hat.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his weekly columns are posted.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307
540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com