

Elusive duo, armed with a dozen tacos, overdue

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Rabbit Peak, Santa Rosa Mountains

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By Ron Barry

The callout came at around 2:00 Sunday morning - two guys, ages 16 and 21, were overdue from a hike down by the Salton Sea. I piled the gear into my truck, and picked up Bernie McIlvoy on the way out, with our destination being the Indio Sheriff's substation.

The Indio Sheriff directed us south to a series of dirt roads outside Coachella that led out to some cultivated fields. The eastern horizon was changing from ink black to indigo as dawn approached. The rescue van was parked next to a field, and members of the lost boys' family were there. The victims were lightly dressed, so they definitely spent a chilly night up there, and they had a dozen or so tacos with them. They were supposed to have gone hiking up towards Rabbit Peak Saturday morning, to get up into the snow. As dawn approached, maps were pulled out and we went over the most probable routes they would have taken. Two routes were top priority - one was up a large winding canyon, the other up a ridge that led eventually to the top.

Soon after sunrise, Don Landells arrived in his Jet Ranger. Bernie and I boarded his ship, with John Dew going as observer. After a quick recon of the lower ridges and valleys, Bernie had Don drop us off on a dominant ridge at around the 1500 foot level. After the chopper was out of range, we gave some yells for our victims, but got no reply. Next we checked the ridge out for tracks, and BINGO! Right where the chopper landed, was a set of Vibram tracks, going uphill along the ridge. More searching produced a second set of tracks - these from tennis shoes. A brief conversation with Base, and we knew the boot-prints matched what the boys were wearing.

Don returned and airlifted us up the ridge, tracking from the air until we lost them. We were dropped off, and soon picked up their tracks again. Don returned for more teams as Bernie and I continued up the ridge. Jim Hansen and Darryl Hand were flown up to a point on the ridge a mile ahead of us, where they would try to cut tracks. Unfortunately, they never found any, so we had to assume the guys dropped off the ridge between us and the Hansen/Hand team. Another team was dropped on the ridge at a point between us and Hansen/ Hand, which consisted of

Jim Garvey and Hal Fulkman.

Don then flew up to the snowline to try and find tracks by air, leaving the six of us to figure out where they bombed off the ridge. Don Landells has the keenest eyesight, and eventually he spotted obscure tracks going off the ridge into a canyon, then later on, way up high on another ridge. Our victims had dropped off our ridge, crossed the canyon, and ascended another ridgeline that undulated up to the snowline. Getting low on fuel, Landells picked Bernie and me up, and we had a quick flight up to just below snowline. There was nowhere to land up here, so we stepped out on the runner and dropped down to the ground, trying to avoid the abundant Cholla cacti.

Don returned to Base to refuel, while we tracked our "elusive duo" up a narrow ridge, where the tracks disappeared again! We were searching the area when Base radioed that our 'duo' had arrived at the rescue van. They had retreated from the mountain precisely at the point we were at then.

RMRU is a volunteer search and rescue team that covers Riverside County and assists other teams with search and rescue efforts in other counties. Each member purchases their own equipment and takes time off work, without compensation, to participate in search and rescue missions. Team equipment is purchased from contributions from the community. We are a non-profit organization and are funded by [donations](#) from people like you.