

Search for woman hiking alone in bad weather

March 27, 1989
Tahquitz Canyon
1989-013

Jennifer Isbell, 27 years of age, went to the U.S. Forest Service Office in Idyllwild, on Friday, March 24th and got a permit to camp in the San Jacinto high country. Mary Bowman, USFS employee and RMRU member, told Jennifer to expect bad weather. Nonetheless, Ms. Isbell started hiking up the Devil's Slide trail late in the afternoon, and got to Saddle Junction about dark and in light rain. She wandered around trying to find a campsite, and finally put up her tent and went to bed about 8:30. The rain increased in intensity throughout Friday night, and turned to sleet when Ms. Isbell got up on Saturday.

Saturday morning, she tried to pack up and head back down the trail to Idyllwild, but became confused about directions and went down the east slope from Saddle

Junction. She eventually got to Reed's Meadow sometime Saturday morning, and tried to pitch her tent in the sleet and snow. However, she had problems with the tent. She finally got in the tent and cooked and ate some hot soup. She also had trouble with her stove, and was getting ever colder and wetter since her equipment could not handle such weather conditions. Early Saturday afternoon, she wrote a note, saying she was going to follow the creek downstream. She changed into the last dry clothes she had, and took off, leaving all her equipment and the note in the soaked tent at Reed's Meadow. She wandered through Law's Camp, and then went cross country to Caramba. She saw the ;Impassable Falls Ahead; sign just below Caramba on Monday, but decided she didn't have the strength to go back uphill. She also thought she could conquer any obstacles ahead, since she had already gotten this far. So she took off down Tahquitz Canyon. Late Monday, she came to a waterfall that she didn't want to go down, so she used a rock shelter for the night. Fortunately, Tahquitz Canyon receives little wind except gentle warm updrafts from the desert floor, so the temperatures were very moderate. On Tuesday, Jennifer stayed put in the canyon, moving about to keep warm. She heard the helicopter flying to the west of her, but she was hidden in the shadows of the canyon at the time. When she heard a helicopter again on Wednesday morning, she quickly got on top of a large whitish boulder right in the sun in the bottom of the canyon.

Ms. Isbell was reported missing by a friend on Monday, March 27, and the Riverside County Sheriff personnel called RMRU. Teams from RMRU searched with helicopter support, Monday night and Tuesday morning. On Tuesday, a Mountain Rescue Association (MRA) call-out was initiated and searchers arrived from San Diego, China Lake, Sierra Madre, Joshua Tree and Altadena Search and Rescue teams. There were also members of California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA) with their dogs.

The search area was broadened on Tuesday, March 28, when virtually all of Jennifer's equipment and tent were found in Reed's Meadow, along with an undated note.

Early Wednesday morning, a Hughes 500E helicopter from the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office arrived at the Keenwild base. Pilot Sgt. Vic Brimmer and Dep. Bill Fertig rode in front, while RMRU member Steve Bryant rode in back. The plan was for Steve to give the pilot and spotter a tour of the high country and upper Tahquitz Canyon. Then the helicopter would drop Steve off at the Caramba South helispot. The next load was to bring in the tracking dog and handler to Caramba South. After showing Vic and Bill the major features of the high country South of Wellman's divide, they flew about a mile down Tahquitz Canyon. Within five minutes, Deputy Fertig had spotted Jennifer waving on a big rock in the bottom of the canyon. Deputy Fertig told her through the loudhailer to STAY PUT and KEEP WARM while the helicopter went back to base. The helicopter then returned to get the technical equipment and people it would take to get her up the side of the canyon to a helispot.

At base, RMRU member Cameron Robbins got in the helicopter and was flown to the canyon. They made their way down through the rocks and extremely thick brush to Ms. Isbell. After making sure that her condition was stable, they moved her to a helispot and she was airlifted to Keenwild heliport. She was then transported to Hemet Valley Hospital for observation, and released that same day.

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.