

Search for missing hiker resumes

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See additional note below the news article.

By Guy McCarthy
The Press-Enterprise

Police and volunteers searched desert foothills and mountain ridges near the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway for more than a week before they stopped looking for Joshua David Best. See [Mission 2000-021](#).

The 36-year-old Palm Springs man had been missing since Sept. 9 and dozens of searchers found no sign of him.

But his family and friends refused to give up. Now the search is back on.

On Sunday, Sept 24th, Best's brother-in-law and two buddies hiked into the woods above the tramway and found Best's wallet near the top of a treacherous escarpment known as Leatherneck Ridge.

Other clues, including a tramway receipt and a faint track of footprints, persuaded authorities to renew an organized search for Best on Monday. The group was still scouring the area Wednesday.

"It's a miracle in itself they found the wallet," said Lisa Best, 42, one of Best's three sisters who have kept a vigil at the upper tramway station this week.



William Wilson Lewis III / The Press-Enterprise

Jim Fairchild, operations leader of the Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit, communicates with search crews in the San Jacinto Mountains in the search for Joshua David Best, who has been missing since Sept. 9.

"It's weird, it's bizarre," she said Tuesday. "But there's a chance he could still be alive."

Police and trained searchers initially doubted the unlikely, needle-in-a-haystack find of the wallet. How could a family member of a missing person simply walk into the San Jacinto high country and find such a vital clue?

But inside the wallet, along with Best's identification, was a tramway receipt dated 3 p.m. Sept. 9, the last day Best was seen. Also boosting the credibility of the discovery was a single track of large footprints, consistent with Best's size 13 shoes.



Kevin Hufnagel, KMIR 6 News

"The tracks appear to be heading down into the valley," said sheriff's Deputy Leonard Hollingsworth, a liaison to the Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit. "The wallet's a good lead, the tracks are a good lead. It looks like we may be on the right track."

The last time Best was seen, he told his boss he was going out but did not say where, Hollingsworth said. Best is a plumbing contractor who helps run the Tiki Spa Hotel in Palm Springs.

Family members started looking for him the next day and found his car in one of the tramway's lower parking lots on Sept. 11. Police and bloodhounds found no trace of Best in the foothills and canyons near the parking lots.

But when the dogs were taken up the tramway on Sept. 14, they immediately hit a scent that led around the Long Valley area south of the tramway. Volunteers continued searching for Best until Sept. 18, when a Palm Desert woman was reported missing in the same area.

The subsequent search for 22-year-old Jeannine Landreneaux ended successfully on Sept. 20, when a helicopter spotted the woman in Tahquitz Canyon. See [Mission 2000-022](#). The organized search for Best remained dormant until his wallet was found Sunday.

On Wednesday, as volunteers continued searching steep ridges and canyons northwest of the tramway, another of Best's sisters said she and her family were less confident their loved one could be found alive.

"I'm still hopeful because he may have found water," said Jarrett Howard, 29, of Desert Hot Springs. "But no, it doesn't look good. He's been out there since the 9th, more than two weeks." Howard stood on a balcony at the upper tramway station overlooking Long Valley on Wednesday as she waited for news from searchers.

"I just feel more comfortable up here, being close to the people who know what's going on with the search," Howard said.

It was Howard's husband, Dean Howard, 29, who found Best's wallet Sunday. He was among several people searching for Best on Wednesday.

"We're really grateful for everyone's efforts, especially the volunteers," Jarrett Howard said. "Without them, we wouldn't have any help."

The north-facing ridges and canyons of the San Jacinto Mountains drop more than 7,000 vertical feet in six miles, making it one of the steepest and most treacherous mountain areas in California. Since the tramway opened in 1963, hundreds of novice day-trippers and hikers have become lost on barren slopes and brush-choked chasms.

Many lose their way, then spot the roads and towns on the desert floor, search and rescue officials said. The signs of civilization seem so close, and in fact they are -- as the crow flies. For humans, the descent can take days. Few people have climbed all the way down.

"Just about every canyon you go down here, you come to a cliff," said Don Ricker, 71, a founding member of the rescue unit.

Volunteers with the donation-supported Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit have rescued hundreds of people from this area in the past 27 years. Sometimes all they find is a body, and often they find nothing at all.

If Best attempted to walk down Leatherneck Ridge or one of the adjacent canyons, his odds of survival depend on many variables, including whether he is injured, Hollingsworth said.

"He could be OK," said Mountain Rescue volunteer Bruce Sanny, 59, of Hemet. "There's waterfalls and pools in places, and he could eat some of the shrubs. But it's a long time to be out here."

Sanny and Ricker, of Moreno Valley, were among the volunteers searching for Best on Wednesday. Ricker, a founding member of the Rescue Unit, and Sanny hiked into the area northwest of the tram where Best's wallet was found, searching for clues others might have missed.

Twists of orange surveyor's tape, tied on tree limbs at intervals of 15 to 30 yards,

marked the spots where likely footprints were found.

"This is what they found yesterday and Monday," Sanny said. "Other people are looking on the ridge below us."

Searchers will continue today with the aid of a Los Angeles County sheriff's helicopter, organizers said.

"I'm telling everyone in the field to take their time, go slow, and think about where (Best) would go," said Jim Fairchild, 71, of Riverside, the Rescue Unit's acting operations manager. "Put yourself in his shoes and think."

Anyone with information about Best may call the Riverside County Sheriff's Department at 909-776-1099 and press 9.

Joshua Best is described as 6 feet 2 inches, 175 pounds, with brown hair and hazel eyes. He may have a mustache and a light goatee. He was last seen wearing a light colored dirty T-shirt and swim trunks.



Staff Photographer, KMIR 6 News

Additional Note:

RMRU searched all week and conducted another large search with many team members on Saturday, Sept. 30th. RMRU concentrated on the North Side of Mt. San Jacinto. Los Angeles Helicopter Air-5 transported search teams to and from field assignments.

RMRU once again called off the search for Joshua Best who has been missing since Sept. 9th.

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.