



## Missing Hiker at San Jacinto Peak

**September 6th, 2006**  
**San Jacinto Mountains**  
**2006-022**

by Gwenda Yates

It's Monday night after a three-day weekend. My phone rings. I answer it, not even knowing who is calling. "No I don't want to do a search tonight." The reply is: too bad, you are going anyway. The report was of a missing hiker from the Palm Springs Tram who had done a day hike to San Jacinto Peak and not returned. The park rangers searched for about three hours before calling RMRU.

As I was driving to the scene I was thinking "oh great," someone gets to go to Caramba tonight. Most people who get lost coming down from the peak see the lights of Palm Springs and think they can just hike down to them. As I arrived at the upper tram station the situation changed, going from bad to the absolute worst. After interviewing our reporting party, Keith, it was learned that our subject, Wesley, was not missing on the trail down from the peak, but at the peak itself. This opened up our search area to the whole mountain. I just hope I was able to hide my near panic from Keith.

Searchers were deployed into the field as they arrived. Steve (with a bruised ankle) and Nick were first, then Liz and John. Their first assignments were to check the trails. By morning we had more field teams as Jim M. and Jim B. were on the 6 a.m. tram car. Kevin and Patrick were able to catch a helicopter at the lower tram and were flown into Tahquitz Canyon. By noon we enlisted the help of Desert SAR as we got the approval from Office of Emergency Services to call in all Southern California Type 1 (technical rock) rescue teams. I knew at that point it was going to get big. It is a big mountain and we were tasked with finding just one person. And to make our task even harder we learned our subject wore hearing aids and was basically unable to hear us. As evening fell and teams returned to base to debrief, we realized we had nothing. We knew he was not on a trail as we found no sign.

Wednesday I arrived on scene at 5 a.m. and checked in with my team that had spent the night at the tram. There was still no news, so we set up base at the lower tram parking lot. I had Kevin working with me at base as he has the true experience at operations. With the help of Deano we were able to set a very organized base camp. We had teams coming from Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties, as well as LA's Air 5, a U.S. National Guard Black Hawk, and our own Riverside County Aviation. We concentrated our efforts on areas where others have been found in the past. Knowing we had the whole mountain to check, it

seemed an impossible task, but, with strong air support, we were able to insert teams on to the peak as well as into the lower drainages. We even attempted to put a dog and handler Kobby on the peak, but failed. Rain storms hindered the search in the afternoon, but everyone pushed on. It had been 2.5 days and we still had no sign. As I drove home at 8 p.m., I looked at the mountain and asked Wesley to please send us a sign letting us know where you are.

Thursday it was Deano and myself at base and we had our field team assignments ready. As teams report in we informed them that the assignments are short so be thorough: we go off trail today, assuming Wesley must be hurt. We have checked every trail, even the old ones most don't know about. We use the Black Hawk to scour the North Face. We sent Sierra Madre SAR into Tahquitz Canyon and Montrose SAR into Long Valley Canyon, as these are both areas where hikers have gone in the past trying to get to the lights of Palm Springs. Both teams came up with nothing, not even a single footprint. Other teams (Palm Springs and San Gorgonio) were flown to the peak to again check the boulders in that area. Yet other teams hiked all the way to Idyllwild. As I drove home that night at 8 p.m., I look up at the mountain and plead: please send us a sign. Later that night, Glenn, Kevin, and myself drew up the next day's plans from Kevin's shop. Finally at 11 p.m., it's for sleep.

Friday, going into our fourth day, the attitude at base camp was a little more subdued. Though no one said it aloud, we all asked ourselves "Are we looking for a body now?" We had found nothing, not a trace.

Our efforts Friday were again on the peak. Getting a scent dog and as many searchers as possible to the top was the priority. We had lost the help of LA's Air 5 due to fires in their county, but we still had the Black Hawk and the Riverside helicopters. The dog and handler were able to hike after being flown into Round Valley. With the help of Riverside Sheriff's aviation, the game plan was to have one helicopter fly teams to Round Valley and the other take them to the peak, one at a time. At around noon we received word that Team 3 had spotted something blue, but were unable to get to it, so we sent a helicopter to check it out. When we began to hear reports of smells coming from the area of Team 3, everyone at base feared the worst. Wesley's uncle went to get ice and we all tried to keep the news we were hearing from showing on our faces. In the next few minutes we heard reports Wesley had been found, not only alive, but was on the helicopter with Tony and Kevin and they were bringing him back to base. I ran to find Wesley's hiking partner Keith and tell him the great news, but as soon as I saw him the tears started. I yelled "No, it's good news! They have him he is alive and well!" Wesley was flown back to base camp and was checked out by team nurse, Jeri, who pronounced him in good condition, but he got a ride to the hospital just to be sure. At that point all I could think was this is why we do this. For all the missed nights of sleep and days spent hiking till our legs feel like they will not take us another step. So that people like Wesley will live to see another sunrise.

I would like to take a monument to thank everyone involved in this search. Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit, Desert SAR, Montrose SAR Sierra Madre SAR, Riverside County Search Dogs, San Bernardino Cave Team, West Valley SAR, San Gorgonio SAR, Mountain SAR, Rim of the World SAR. And to the people from Walgreen's: thank you so much. You

spoiled us, by cooking us dinner every night and meeting the basic needs like water, sunscreen, power bars, etc. We would like to extend an invitation to our next search.

Thanks to all.

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Photos and video from Friday:



Wesley with friend Keith, CPL Garvin, and Jeri Sanchez.



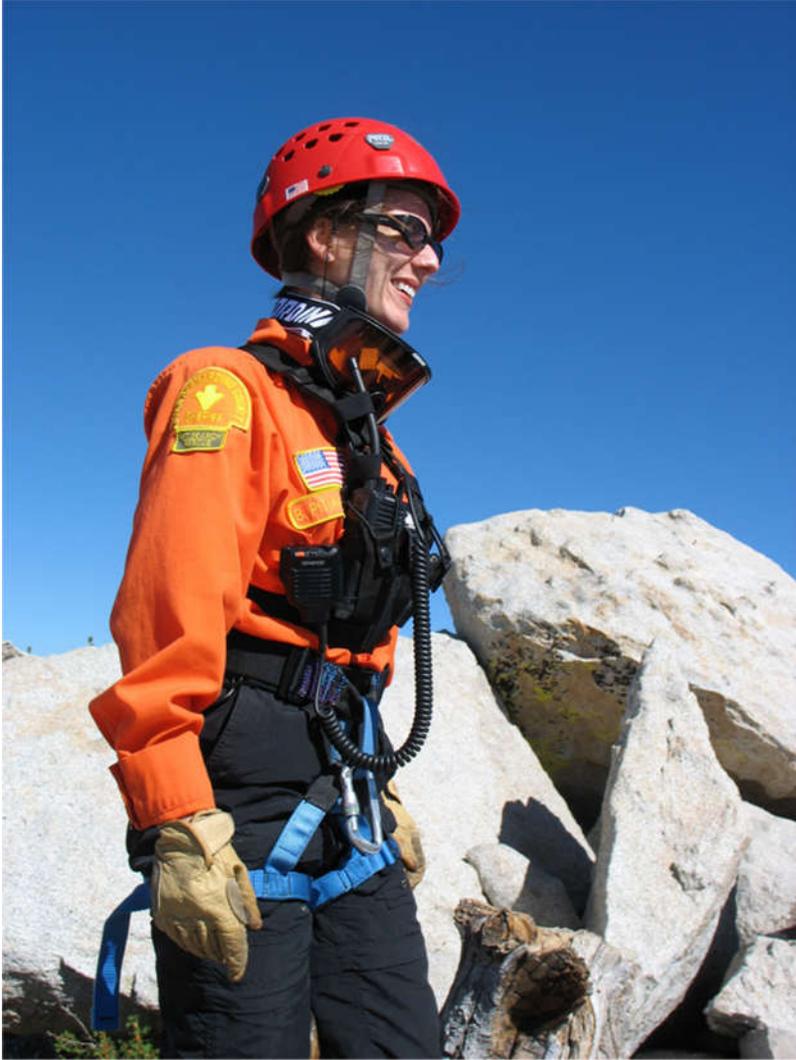
LA County's Air Rescue Five coming into the lower helipad on Thursday.



An Air Guard Black Hawk circling near the north peak of San Jacinto.



Riverside's Star 92 hovers at the peak as a member of San Bernardino's Cave Rescue Team jumps off. Pilot Tony Bowen, Flight Officer Kevin Boss.



A member of the S.B. Cave Rescue Team on the summit.



RMRU's Lew Kingman exiting the hovering Star 92 on the summit of San Jacinto. Pilot Tony Bowen, Flight Officer Kevin Boss.



Flight Officer Andy Rasmussen on Riverside's Star 96 near the command post. Pilot Craig McDonald.



Members of several teams on the summit of San Jacinto go over their search assignments one last time on the summit of San Jacinto.

Video

[Star 93 Taking Off](#)

Riverside's Star 93 takes off near the incident command post. (10MB Quicktime Movie)

[Star 92 hovering](#)

Star 92 hovering at the summit as a search member exits. (1.6MB Quicktime Movie)

[Black Hawk](#)

Air Guard Black Hawk starts the process to pull Team 4 (Montrose) off the north face. (1MB Quicktime Movie)

[Flight from Round Valley](#)

The flight out from Round Valley. (10MB Quicktime Movie). Nasty sound, but holding a camera out the door of a helo is not conducive to optimal audio quality.

[Landing at the ICP](#)

Approach and landing at the (by then nearly deserted) Incident Command Post. (7MB Quicktime Movie)

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Photos from Tuesday:



Kevin Walker exits Riverside's Star 93 on Tuesday at the start of a search assignment.



Pete Carlson and Dave Webb exit LA's Air 5 after a search assignment on Wednesday.



Pete and Dave are debriefed by Kevin Walker at the Operations truck.



Just a few of the teams helping out in this search.



LA's Air 5 prepares to take more search teams into the field.



Drinks and food graciously donated by Walgreen's, where the missing man works.

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.