



Nine People Lost in Snowstorm

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Fire Roads Below Idyllwild
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by Patrick McCurdy

Through a series of intense storms, Southern California doubled its Winter snow pack in the first three weeks of March. One such storm resulted in RMRU being activated at 6 p.m. on Sunday, March 19th, for a man stranded on Thomas Mountain near Lake Hemet. Getting up the mountain on Highway 74 was a bit dodgy as heavy snow fell and we found a mess at Mountain Center, just short of the summit. Pressed into service by the CHP to unstuck stuck vehicles blocking the highway, we were just ready to proceed to Thomas Mountain when we heard from our advanced team that the stranded man had been found. Thoughts of home, a late dinner, and a warm bed dissolved as a sheriff's deputy informed us at about 8 p.m. that we had another search.

A party of nine in two vehicles was stranded in the snow on a dirt road somewhere below Idyllwild. Most serious, however, a small child and a infant were among the stranded party. The party had made cell phone contact with sheriff's dispatchers, but were unable to say exactly where they were.

Two team vehicles headed down the mountain to establish a command post while six of us, in three personal 4WD trucks, started driving snow-covered dirt roads in what was often rather treacherous conditions. Myself, with David Webb, and Jim Manues, with Ray Hussey, drove the two trucks of Team One down the Control Road while Kirk Cloyd, with Brad Scott, drove his truck (Team Two) up Bee Canyon Road from Highway 74.

After clearing the Control Road, Team One drove to Pine Cove and headed down Bee Canyon Road from the top. While the Control Road had been challenging, Bee Canyon Road was downright unpleasant. Snow up to one foot deep made driving a challenge, forcing us at one point to dig my stuck truck out with snowshoes. Eventually we met up with Team Two and regrouped. We then all drove up East Indian Truck Trail and eventually climbed back through the snow onto Highway 243. At no point was there any sign of the missing party.

A San Diego County Sheriff's helicopter joined in the search about 4 a.m., but did not have enough fuel to stay overhead very long.

As we continued to scour the fire roads looking for the missing family, Gwenda Yates and Grace Manues at base were finally able to make cell phone contact with one of the

subjects and get a better idea of where they were - though we still did not know their exact location.

With the search area narrowed, however, we were able to focus our resources in a smaller area. David and I checked a side road off of the Control Road. About a mile up this road, in deep snow, I was becoming doubtful that we would find the subjects on this road when we suddenly saw footprints in the fresh snow. About a hundred yards further on, my headlights shown on smiling faces. I could hear concerned family members cheering over the radio after I called in "subjects found."

Within ten minutes the other two vehicles arrived and we quickly had the nine subjects loaded in our trucks. We started rolling just as the first light of dawn began to illuminate a beautiful snowy landscape. Forty-five minutes later we had all the subjects back at base camp in Hemet.

As a side note, I would like to compliment the mother of the two children. Even when pressured by others to attempt to hike out, she insisted on staying with the vehicles. They had a little food and water, stayed bundled in warm clothes, and ran their vehicles from time to time in order to stay warm. Leaving their vehicles and hiking cross-country through the snow could have proven disastrous. She did exactly the right thing to stay put and stay warm. Kudos to mom for keeping a cool head in a bad situation.



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.