



Chelsea King Search

Feb 26-28, 2010

Lake Hodges area, San Diego County

2010-004

Written by Dana Potts and Tom Mahood

RMRU was called to assist the San Diego Sheriff's Department and the San Diego Police Department in what turned out to be a very public and trying time for the San Diego community. RMRU was called in as part of a mutual aid effort to assist in locating Chelsea King, a 17 year old high school girl who had parked her car at the Rancho Bernardo Community Center on Thursday, February 25th and gone off to run around the area of Lake Hodges. Team members responded over three days and were divided up and partnered with local team members and sent out on missions.

It was obvious from the start that this mission was going to be a very large scale operation. Teams from local, county and federal agencies were already on scene the first day. Our teams covered well over thirty miles of trail on foot over the several days of searching, some members with very little sleep after responding from their personal jobs.

Friday, Feb 26th:

RMRU members turning out for this day's search included Carlos Carter, Jim and Grace Manues, Chad Marler, Dana Potts, Chuck Springer, and Les Walker. While RMRU fielded a good presence on this first day of the search, it was hampered somewhat by the need to pair search teams with trained search dogs, and there were more teams on site at that time than dogs. None the less, RMRU was able to perform a bit of searching late in the day.

Saturday, Feb 27th:

RMRU members present included Glenn Henderson, Mike Herman, Tom Mahood, Jim and Grace Manues, Patrick McCurdy, Nick Nixon, Jeff Toscas and Gwenda Yates. With the second day of the search going strong, Riverside County Sheriff's office (RSO) had brought its large mobile command post on site. RSO also brought a number of pop up shelters, which proved very popular with other teams throughout the day due to it being a fairly rainy day.

The morning's search involved a line search following a hiking trail along the

shoreline of the lake about a half mile west of the Community Center. The brush and reeds were thick in areas, which made for slow going. The searching took about 2 to 3 hours in lightly falling rain and a few potential items were located and marked for evidence technicians to later assess significance. The morning search was accomplished without incident other than Glenn losing his personal GPS unit while searching in the dense reeds along the shoreline. Despite efforts by RMRU members to locate it, the GPS was never recovered.

Shortly after returning and breaking for lunch, very heavy rains started falling, greatly enhancing the value of the RSO pop up shelters not only with RMRU, but also with many other teams taking part in the operation. As if to signal it was time to get back out into the field, the rains abated and RMRU headed out for an afternoon search. This second search continued westerly from where we had left off in the morning. It covered a small inlet of the lake and pushed into some greenbelts of the adjacent residential neighborhoods.

That evening search teams were called into the community center and informed that a suspect had been identified in the case and that police were searching for the individual.

Sunday, Feb 28th:

RMRU members assisting in this final day included Tom Mahood, Patrick McCurdy, Tom Meyers, Jeff Toscas and Dave Webb. Weather-wise, Sunday was the exact opposite of the previous day, turning out to be warm, clear and sunny. While this made field operations much easier, the rains had pretty much washed away subtleties such as tracks. This day again involved two searches for RMRU, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

The morning's search was performed by a sizable combined team of RMRU and San Diego County Mountain Rescue members, led by Dave Webb. It covered an area even further westerly than the earlier day's searches, and consisted of a shoreline and trail line search of over a mile of terrain. That required considerable time, and the team didn't return to base until well into the lunch hour.

After a quick break for food, we started out again, performing painstaking line searches of large, densely vegetated greenbelts and drainage areas through the adjacent residential neighborhoods to the west, covering a couple of miles. The rains had washed a lot of trash through these areas, making it difficult to discern what was potentially important from what was merely trash.

Late that day, San Diego County authorities announced John Albert Gardner III had been taken into custody as a suspect in the case. He was arrested at a lakeside

restaurant less than a mile away from where we had been conducting our search activities that morning.

Postscript to the search:

On Tuesday March 2nd, searchers found the body of Chelsea King in a shallow grave near the lake shore, in dense brush not far from the community center. On May 15th, 2010, John Albert Gardner III was sentenced to life in prison without parole, after pleading guilty to the murder of Chelsea King.

Members present: Carlos Carter, Glenn Henderson, Mike Herman, Tom Mahood, Grace Manues, Jim Manues, Chad Marler, Patrick McCurdy, Tom Meyers, Nick Nixon, Dana Potts, Chuck Springer, Jeff Toscas, Les Walker, Dave Webb, and Gwenda Yates.

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.