

North Face

March 04, 2016
San Jacinto Peak
2016-008

Written by Matt Jordon and Judy Spowart

Matts side of the mountain

Of course just as I was falling asleep Friday night I got a call from Gwenda asking me to grab my gear and head to Snow Creek to assist a search for a missing alpine climber attempting the north face of Mt. San Jacinto. Since most of the team was out getting re-certified in snow and ice, duty fell onto me to come out of early retirement (and quit my sniveling) - it was now go time again. Fortunately, I soon found out that I was to be taking a 'free ride' up the tram instead of a midnight trudge up Snow Creek and this made me happy!

Upon arriving at the valley station, I met up with RSO deputies and a few good men of the State Park (Rangers) who gave me a basic breakdown of the situation: Two 'experienced' buddies climbing the north face of San Jacinto for the first time - one was completely exhausted approximately 400 feet from the peak and hell bent on heading east. The climbers separated at this point and since the poor tired guy left behind had been missing for hours now, alarm bells started ringing. Nevertheless, I grabbed my snowshoes, throw some extra gear in my pack and stripped off my extra layers as tonight was panning out to be a fast hike up to the peak in windy late winter conditions.

At about this time I was walking with the rangers into what I thought was the last car up that night; an RSO deputy informed us that RMRU member [and tech climber] Donny Goetz was on his way from Los Angeles and that he's be taking another car up as soon as he arrived. Because of this new info, my plan changed again to man the radio/ repeater at the Mountain Station and wait for Donny so we could form our own team instead of me heading out with the park rangers as initially conceived. More good news: Lee and Judy were going to come up from the Idyllwild side.

Cutting to the chase: When Donny arrived, we loaded up from the mountain station and wound our way down into the dark on the now quiet cement path toward the Long Valley ranger station. We were both remarking that it was good to see each other again since his wedding in Yosemite and we caught up on some of our recent adventures along the way.

Popping into the station, we met with a ranger making sure our team geared up since a storm was brewing and winds were really picking up - it was going to rain or snow within the next 24 hours.

We went out into the night set on finding this dude and so we headed off into the hills. Our route would be Sid Davis. The old 'locals trail' that many take as an alternate into the dark and now foreboding Tamarack Valley, this would be our bypass sweep of the Low Trail. As we hiked, we called out the subjects name every 3-5 minutes or so. Since the wind was howling by now, it became harder and harder to listen for any sort of faint reply over the creaking and rushing 'water' sounds that cold mountain air blowing through old growth pine trees commonly produce. We were having fun though. We checked in with the ranger station every 30 minutes and then decided to head up toward 'The Mound' which is near Cornell Peak in order to possibly get a better perspective of the Long Valley/ Round Valley area. This turned out to be a good idea because it gave us a chance to view the valleys and the northeast side of the mountain where we envisioned the subject possibly being. We called and called, we stood on an overlook and shone our headlamps back and forth across the valleys. Eventually, we spotted the rangers and made radio contact with them and then with Lee and Judy coming up from Idyllwild.

Around 4am we Bivied for the night. We had a good spot here. Donny and I were beat though - the wind was howling and we were getting really chilled on this exposed ledge searching and calling. The wind was picking up and at times it felt like we could have literally been blown off the mountain. I couldn't help but think about the subject being trapped in some terrible spot on the north face (or worse) as I tried to stay warm under a draped sleeping bags between the rocks.

At 5:30am we were back up and looking across the valleys and toward the east over the edge. Making our way back up along that same edge up and past the Cornell area continually calling for the subject. Not long after sunrise a fixed wing aircraft started making passes. I also found out that Sharon and company with DSAR were going to ambitiously start the Snow Creek sweep, it was good to have teams come together like this in a pinch.

The winds were howling and the entire peak was covered in a thick fog getting lower like a god's hand reaching down over the mountain. The state park rangers were challenged with low visibility, again - it looked like a big dark grey hand moving over the mountain about to cover the entire thing, weird. Still moving, still calling, no luck. Really thinking that there is a slim chance this guy made it through the night on the north face if that's where he truly was.

Around 7:00am we got a call from Long Valley Ranger Station: "The subject has been found and he is being cared for... return to base". What a relief! Glad to find out that he

made it through the night! Donny and I walked back through the deer brush, rocks and pine trees to later find out exactly what happened.

The subject got lost in what we believe to be the area below Jean Peak Bowl and Tramarack the 'Boulder Field' and possibly even the old Boy Scout Trail, he was uninjured and in good spirits after the long slog up Snow Creek. He likely endured a cold night wandering around the old growth trees pondering the distant whistle blasts, but to his credit he was more prepared than most and he remained positive. His years of hiking and climbing paid dividends in a safe exit -- however complicated. Upon meeting at the Valley Station, I stated: 'All's well that ends well!' -- and he heartily agreed.

Judy's side of the mountain

While Donny and Matt headed to the Palm Springs Tram, Lee and Judy decided to approach from Humber Park. The plan was to hike up the Devil's Slide trailhead towards Wellman's Divide in case the lost hiker took a wrong turn and ended up in that area.

The first order of business was to get the appropriate gear together. In anticipation of snow and ice on the trail this consisted of full winter packs, including snow shoes, crampons, and ice axes. After loading the packs into the car, we drove to the Humber Park parking lot. It was completely empty at this time of the night. It was beautiful and peaceful, but with the urgent task at hand, there was little time to enjoy it. We were told there would be no helicopter support tonight, due to the weather, so we knew we were in for a long night of hiking. No time to waste.

We donned our headlamps and started up the Devil's Slide trail around 10:30PM. We continued 2 ½ miles to Saddle Junction and turned onto the PCT. The weather was cold, and we started seeing some snow on the trail. The wind was blowing through the tree tops, providing a melodic background to the sound of our boots crunching in the snow. We hiked for another 2 1/2 miles, and around 2:30am decided we needed to catch a few hours of sleep and hit the trail again at daylight.

We found a small level spot at the top of Angel's Glide and quickly set up camp. The wind was really blowing now, and the temperature was around 24 degrees. Sleepwear consisted of many layers, including thermals and two down jackets for Judy, mittens, and wool hats. In spite of the conditions, sleep came quickly, and we awoke at daylight feeling refreshed and ready to get back on the trail. We began breaking down camp when we heard over the radio that the lost hiker had made his way to the tram on his own. A quick call to Gwenda confirmed that the search was over and the lost hiker was found. We finished packing up, and headed down the mountain, relieved that this mission had a happy outcome.

RMRU Members Involved: Lee Arnson, Donny Goetz, Matt Jordon and Judy Spowart.

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.