

## Caramba Search

**April 17, 2016**

**Tramway - San Jacinto Mountains**

**2016-015**

Written by Matt Jordon

Of course - just as I was finishing a pleasant family dinner in Redlands I get a text alerting me to a rescue. Since I live about 5 miles from the Aerial Tramway, I usually try my best to respond to these particular missions so I checked the time and drove out, trying hard to make the last car up. After a quick grab of my gear bag at home along the way, I met up with Kirk at the valley station. "Subject last pinged in Caramba. We are going to try to use this new app to get a better location on him, hopefully it works" Kirk said. Good thing he had his phone, I thought to myself. By this time, the last car up was being held over as we waited for other members to arrive. Kevin, Eric, and Cameron appeared in succession and after a short scramble to select proper gear, we were all aboard.

Riding the tram up at night with no tourists, no external lights and no rotation is about what I'd imagine it's like to be in a submarine falling miles deep into the blackness of the ocean. The darkness when facing the mountain is disorienting; rocking, swaying and the cold night air all remind me of being at sea. There is a unique eeriness to it that I somehow enjoy, it's almost like we'll be ambushed by a giant squid or Mynock from Star Wars.

The usual routine takes place when we arrive at the mountain station. The tram operator says a quick farewell and we're off to the "mission room" which is behind an infrequently used banquet hall on the second level complete with fridge, cot, heater and small bathroom. It's the place where he who 'mans' the radio is often jilted awake by the sounds of crackling hails from distant members on the radio. Most of the time, there's also a sense of urgency to lock all the doors behind the last team member out as the night is long and the creep factor is high at 8,500'. The unfamiliar sounds of raccoons and ring-tailed cats exploring the building don't help calm the nerves either.

Not much can be said about hiking to Caramba around midnight. Most don't want to do it in the daytime, much less with heavy packs carrying water for two. This is a section of mountain that drops about six miles and essentially dead ends into a large waterfall

before tumbling over into oblivion. For those that have ever crept downstairs into an old basement at night, it's like that but a lot worse! It's an area that a lot of hikers who are unfamiliar with the mountain wind up for basically two reasons: #1. It looks like a copy of Round/ Tamarack Valley so people are easily confused, #2. Its ALL downhill and what can I say -- it's easier to hike down than up! Nevertheless, it takes a glutton for punishment to get this kind of mission done but in the beginning we're all highly motivated. The last time I was here was over three years ago before the massive fire so certainly I'd get to see what the forest looked like now. I was looking forward to some surprises.

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**Strange Sites in Burn Area**  
**Photo by Eric Holden.**

The trail past Hidden Divide has been closed for only three years but there was so much debris scattered about that it was difficult to find in sections. Past Laws junction, the fallen logs, new brush and burned out ghosts of trees everywhere in sight made me recognize how fast nature can reclaim her property. Thereafter, the trail frequently washed out so we had to do some decent route finding. We now relied heavily on GPS to take us to the subject's last known location which we received via cell phone ping and a miraculous screenshot text from this Air Force veteran that included his position coordinates. This was literally the best thing he could have done. We found out that he climbed to high ground to send it before his cell phone would die. Fortunately, we managed to communicate with the subject earlier via cell phone and we reminded him to

stay put until we got to him.



**Kevin Looking for Prints**  
Photo by Eric Holden.



**Subjects Print**  
Photo by Eric Holden.

We arrived in a textbook fashion then gave the man water and some food. It turned out that he was hoping to complete a longer circuit this day beginning at the tram and

heading to Wellman's Divide down to Saddle Junction and back up toward Hidden Valley. Unfortunately, he somehow underestimated the distance and his location so he wound up deep in Tahquitz drainage. Fortunately, he was astute enough to warm himself with a small emergency fire (that was later properly extinguished) and managed to drink a little water from the nearby creek. He was found in good spirits yet obviously tired and understandably mentally fatigued. Nevertheless, he rallied and chose to hike out after about a ten-minute break.



**Kevin, Cameron, and Matt with Subject Found**  
Photo by Eric Holden. <

On the way back, Eric took the lead with his GPS unit and led our meandering team up the loose and obscure mountainside on the way back up to the tramway. I was content to be a silent hiker at this point, occasionally cracking a dry comment as breath would permit. Temperatures dropped down to the low 30's and whenever we stopped for more than two minutes, our bodies began freezing up as most of us were in lightweight gear to stay cool when actually moving. During one particular break at around 4am, Eric spotted something shimmering in the distance uphill to our left. We quickly recognized three sets of eyes peering at us through the darkness, bobbing up and down and blinking periodically. It was the bold presence of three mountain lions staring down on us from their high ground advantage. The sounds of our whistle blasts and claps didn't bother them and when we hiked on, we could faintly see them in the distance - still watching closely. Poor Cameron was cougar bait as the caboose on this train and I was impressed with Kevin's ability to see in front of himself and behind in the same stride!



**Subject and Rescuers in Morning Light**  
Photo by Eric Holden. <

By the time we reached the high trail above Round Valley, we were all feeling the wooziness of sleep encroaching. First light brings a glowing warmth despite being ambient and indirect. Another successful mission in the bag. Our good-hearted veteran did a great job giving us his location and staying calm and upbeat despite being exhausted after a long day of hiking. We made it out and up the long ramp to the Tramway. I was honored to have spent another night hiking with the A-Team members of RMRU.



**Eric, Cameron, Matt, Subject, Kirk, and Kevin back at Tramway  
Photo by Tramway Personal.**

**RMRU Members Involved:** Kirk Cloyd, Cameron Dickenson, Eric Holden, Kevin Kearn, and Matt Jordon.

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.