



Stranded Skyline Hiker

May 22, 2019

Below Grubs Notch, Tramway

2019-030

Written by Blake Douglas

I was completely unsurprised when my RMRU ringtone went off in the middle of a heavy rainstorm on a Wednesday afternoon. The storm had already activated a weather warning at my job site, and I knew that rain in San Jacinto probably meant snow in the mountains. Our subject was a hiker on the Skyline trail, unprepared for snow conditions and unable to proceed up the final part of the trail.

Skyline is a popular and (in)famous trail running from Palm Springs to the upper tram station, known for being one of the most difficult hikes in our county. Skyline doesn't really resemble what most people visualize when they think of a trail; in many places it's more of a rocky mess that can only be recognized if you're looking for it, and hiking it is a question of whether you enjoy doing one-legged squats for eight miles. Much of the lower portion of the trail falls under the jurisdiction of other SAR teams, while RMRU covers the upper regions, particularly the switchbacks leading up to Grubb's Notch from Coffman's Crag, and the Traverse. Our subject was unaware of snow in the forecast, and Skyline had been snow-free for weeks up to this day. This led him to arrive at the Traverse wearing jeans and a t-shirt, with the trail before him invisible beneath the fresh snow. He wisely stayed put and called for help.

Glenn and I were the first on scene, and ready to set out from the upper tram station immediately, but on further consideration the decision was to hold for additional RMRU team members to arrive. We knew our subject was uninjured, a State Parks ranger was with him, and a supply bag had been dropped from a CHP helicopter, so we could afford to wait.

It's not often that you get to spend part of a mission eating nachos and pizza in a warm building, but we were still anxious to get moving. The tram is usually willing to hold a car for an extra hour or two past their normal closing time, but if a mission runs past 2300 it's basically guaranteed that you'll be spending the night in the mountain station and riding down on the first car at 0630. All the tram-related missions this year have been overnights.

Team members Cameron and Mike George arrived, and we immediately prepared to depart; Mike would stay in reserve with Glenn running base, and Cameron and I would hike to the subject. The fresh snow made the trail more annoying than difficult,

particularly on the rocky switchbacks, and at times it felt like each step was a 50/50 chance of either landing securely or deflecting my crampons off some oddly shaped, barely hidden rock. Despite the aggravations we were warm, enjoying the ephemeral features of the forest immediately after a snowstorm, and comparing the merits of various equipment brands, only occasionally stopping to check our coordinates to ensure we were on the trail.



Map and Tracks of Search/Rescue
Image by Blake Douglas.

We made it to our subject in about an hour. Despite the wind and cold it was a cheerful spot, nestled among rocks with a small campfire overlooking the lights of Palm Springs. Cozy or not, we wanted to get everyone moving; more wet weather was in the forecast for the morning, and our subject looked to be in good shape other than fatigue from hours of hiking. We were now past the time cutoff for catching a tram car off the mountain, but the station was only 1.5 miles up the hill; a better option than sleeping in the wilderness and then hoping to get out before the next storm hit. Once we got moving, our subject warmed up nicely, and we all enjoyed steady conversation as we slogged our way up to the notch, the hike at times feeling more like climbing a snowy, rocky stairwell. Once over the top of the notch, the hike was almost complete except for the steep concrete path to the tram station. Despite the offer of an ATV ride from State Parks, our subject wanted to hike this last bit, and we arrived tired but glad for a happy outcome and the prospect of a few hours of sleep.

What went wrong: Our subject was from Seattle; although he was in good shape, and had scouted portions of the trail days in advance, he had neither monitored the forecast for snow nor anticipated the need to do so, being unfamiliar with the mercurial nature of weather in the San Jacintos and how this adds to the unique challenges of the Skyline trail. Had he done this hike a day earlier, he would have completed it.



Subject, Blake, Glenn, Cameron, and State Park Ranger
Photo by Michael George.

Thanks to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway staff, California State Parks, CHP, and RSO for their teamwork and professionalism.

RMRU Members Involved: Cameron Dickinson, Blake Douglas, Michael George, and Glenn Henderson.

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.