

Man and dog swept down falls

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Strawberry Creek
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By Ed Hill

For most of the year, Strawberry Creek is benign. The water dances along, murmuring over the stones. It tumbles down through Strawberry Grotto over a series of waterfalls and cataracts. In early spring after a winter of heavy snowfall, it assumes a different character. There is a loud roar as the water smashes its way through Strawberry Grotto on its way down the mountain. These are the times that one must respect the power of the water; it can and will kill if given the chance.

On Friday, May 7th, two young couples and their dogs went hiking down through Strawberry Grotto. They were from San Diego and were enjoying the awesome sight of a large volume of water rushing down the canyon. One of the dogs, a black Labrador retriever ended up in the water and was swept away. In an effort to save the dog, George Starnitz entered the water and was also swept over a waterfall. The remaining people hiked out to summon help.

We had planned a weekend of tracking, orienteering, and good fellowship in the Piñon Flats and Martinez Peak area. The call for help found us driving out to the roadhead. Some of the members were diverted early, and Jack Bowman was sent out to the roadhead to catch any stragglers.

The first indication to me that a mission was on was when I arrived at the roadhead and found nobody there. After a ten minute wait, I saw what might have been a rescue van's lights and heard a radio. I walked over there and found Jack sitting in his truck. Shortly I was on my way back to Strawberry Grotto.

Teams were already in the field searching both sides of Strawberry Creek. The water was the highest that we had ever seen. Usually it is not too difficult to cross the creek. This time there were only two places to do so safely. The teams found nothing and returned to base camp for a slow careful search the next day.

Equipped with pikes loaned to us by the fire department, we returned to the creek with the intent of probing every pool and every pocket of fast water. We did our probing while being held on belay. In several cases we rappelled down to a pool and jumared back up when the job was done.

Midday we found the body of the dog. She was caught under a large tree that had been swept over a waterfall and had itself been caught at the base. The poor dog had been swept over two waterfalls. At this point we had a very good idea that we were searching for a body. Bernie McIlvoy wanted to move the tree a bit in the case the man was also caught under the tree. We attempted to move it with a mechanical advantage, but all we did was damage our rope and a Gibb's ascender.

After that we moved slowly upstream probing in all the pools and places where a person could be caught. Mel Krug had brought his wetsuit, and he and Bernie took turns wearing it. The water was so cold that you only wanted to be in it for a few minutes at a time.

In a small pool most of the way down the first waterfall, Bernie felt something different from what he had been feeling all along. He was sure that he had located the dog's master. He could hook the body with the pike but could not dislodge it. The body was being held in the pool by the force of the water. He tied a line to the pike and had three team members pull. They couldn't move it, so he called for more manpower. Mark Hebert crossed the creek on a line, and two other people on the far bank joined up to make six people on the line. That was enough to dislodge the body, and it came tumbling down the creek toward the second falls. I was in the shallow water above the second falls and was able to swing the body into the bank. From there it was a relatively straight forward task to get him into a body bag and transport him to the road at the top of the hill.

My guess is that he had never seen fast water before and had no idea of what it could do to him.

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.