

Family missing on Christmas

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Santa Rosa Mtns
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By Kevin Walker

After a most enjoyable Christmas with my wife Patrice, daughter Bridgett and family too numerous to mention, we had indeed settled down for a long winters rest, when low and behold what was it? Why it's the telephone. Kevin, call your people and have them meet at the Elks Lodge near Piñon at 6:00 AM for a search for a family overdue since Sunday. After finishing my calls and getting gear set out, I was able to get a very short winters sleep and then get back up and drive to Piñon.

When we arrived we learned that a man and his wife and four cousins ranging in age from 9 to 15, had been left at the Santa Rosa Peak turnoff on Saturday, and had planned to hike from there over Santa Rosa and ultimately reach La Quinta on Sunday. That would be a large undertaking even for our marathon hikers on the team. At 6:30 Don Landells arrived with helicopter 816. Fellow team member Jim Fairchild and I were assigned to fly with Don and try and at least cut tracks as the group had been overdue for three days, and had been out for a total of five. It was quite cold out, and the snow above on the Santa Rosas made it seem even worse.



HAPPY TO BE GOING HOME - An anxious and happy group of six wait to be flown out to Piñon, and then go home for a late Christmas.

Another problem we had to contend with was that a storm would be moving in to the area later in the day. Jim and I loaded our packs, climbed in with Don and were off. First thing we did was pick up the dirt road that leaves the highway and follow it towards Santa Rosa. Soon we were into the snow following numerous four wheel drive tracks on the snow covered road. When we reached the Santa Rosa summit the

only thing we saw was a Blazer still buried in the snow, that Don had been days

earlier looking for. We moved on following the road towards Toro Peak. About halfway between the two peaks Don spotted tracks leaving the road. It was a small group going in a very strange direction. This had to be our group. Tracking in the snow was fairly easy, as the tracks stayed in single file and seemed to be contouring around Toro Peak. Along the way we saw where the group had spent the night under a pine tree, and then moved on. We followed the tracks until they left the snow and then things got hard, as it was now desert tracking conditions; hard ground, rocks, etc. Occasionally we would find prints here and there, and be able to keep going. Then there was a period of time that we saw nothing. It was at this point that we were about to fly back to base and prepare for a ground search. As we were starting back Don said that there was an old Indian site not far that had soft sand, and that it would be an excellent place to check for tracks. When we flew over wouldn't you know it - there were the tracks. Don landed and we all got out to check closely. After a little studying Jim was able to make out two adult sized tracks and four children. This was it, back in the bird and off down the large open valley which heads in the direction of Borrego. We did a quick search hoping to catch up with the group, but this was to no avail as we got down to the edge of Borrego and found nothing. We started back up again planning to go back to the general area that we saw the last tracks, and then search slower again. As we flew back towards the open valley Don said he was going to fly along the northeast side of the valley since the group had seemed to be trying to go that direction generally. Both Jim and I thought that Don was crackers but in no time we spotted smoke from a small fire. There was the group. Don found a spot, let Jim and I out and then flew off to get high enough to contact base that we had found the group. Jim and I found them all to be in fair to good shape. One of the boys had lost his shoe the previous day and was now walking with many socks on. And one of the others had extremely sore feet. We helped them gather gear, and Don returned. Three of the boys and the woman went out in the first load, and after a short wait the man, last of the boys and Jim and I were on our way out.



Jim Fairchild

HOME IS THAT WAY - At least that is what the man thought. RMRU member Kevin Walker discusses the actual location of where the lost group of six was at. They thought that La Quinta was just over one ridge, when in actuality they were many miles from civilization.

Everything turned out fine, but because of the gear they had, and their condition if they would have had to stay out in the storm that shortly followed, things might not have

turned out so well. At any rate everyone was happy to be out, and they looked forward to going home and having a late but joyous Christmas.

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.