

Searching for missing group, found more than just people

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Desert Divide
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By Kevin Walker

Just before noon the pagers activated with news of a search. We were to respond to the CDF fire station in Garner Valley. I was the first to arrive, and there I interviewed Robert Bracken, 18, of Riverside. On Monday, Rob and eight other friends started out from Garner Valley and hiked to the Desert Divide. According to Rob, the group became separated on Tuesday. Late in the day Rob had voice contact with two of the party. They were separated by heavy brush below the ridge. They stated that one person was slightly injured and a third member of this particular group had tried to make it out on his own. Five more persons were unaccounted for.

As team members gathered and loaded gear, a light rain began to fall. A helicopter was requested, and Steve DeJesus from Landells Aviation responded with a Bell Jet Ranger. On the first flight out we flew over the top to the divide. Rain was falling on the southern side of the range, but on the northern side it had stopped raining and was only clouded over. After a short time smoke was spotted down a ridge. There were the two that Rob had shouted to a day earlier. Steve found a boulder several hundred feet above the pair, and let off Ray Hussey and Eric Townsend. As they made their way down to the pair, we returned to base. Once back, we learned that five of the nine had hiked out the day before and returned to Riverside. So now we were down to one missing person. Teams were put out near and below where we had located the two hikers, and the Palm Springs Mounted Police was activated to search Palm Canyon below our search area. As teams searched through the day, more was learned about the group. It seems that some did not have the best of records.

Now why would a group go out on a pleasure hike with poor gear into an area that offered little to the amateur. We quickly learned why. Bill Blaschko and Henry Negrete wandered into a marijuana plantation, one of considerable size. It was not an abandoned farm as there were multiple tents, sleeping and food gear, supplies for watering the plants complete with a book on how to grow. This was more than alarming, and I quickly dispatched Steve to pick up Bill and Henry. It was now late in the day, and as we discussed how we could perform a search under these unusual conditions, we were notified that the missing man had been located by the Palm Springs Mounted Police in Palm Canyon (the canyon which drains the northern slope of the Desert Divide.) For us the search was over, but for the Sheriff, the job was just beginning.

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.