



Search for Missing Woman

July 14, 2006
Whitewater Canyon
2006-017

by Jim Bakos

The page came in at 9:00 p.m. on a Friday evening. There was a lost female hiker along the creek in Whitewater canyon. By 10:15 p.m. RMRU was on scene, and ready to search for the missing subject.

This mission seemed a little odd right from the beginning:

The first indication of weirdness came during our briefing with the Sheriff Deputy in charge, and the landowner of the property where the female hiker had gone missing. The Deputy gave us the standard details: Last seen at 2:00 p.m.; Female; 5'-4" in height; 115 pounds; Brown hair; Brown eyes, etc... Then the landowner chimes in with some rather disturbing information: "You folks might want to watch out for the crazy guy that lives down the street, he's a (illegal) drug manufacturer and wanders up and down this creek with a machete."

Our second point of concern was the rather large wildfire burning just north of our location, the winds were blowing toward the fire, but that can easily change in sunny southern California. We formulated an escape plan in case the fire started down towards us.

We started off our search from the subject's creek-side campsite. There we identified a shoe-print that would fit someone of that gender, height and weight. We tracked both upstream and downstream, on both sides, and found nothing that would indicate the subject moved from her initial campsite. There was significant deadfall across the creek every 50' - 100', so we could easily rule out her falling in and being washed downstream.

We then returned to base camp, and tried to ascertain the point at which the subject departed from the vehicle that dropped her off (to be certain we had identified the correct shoe print). The vehicle was there at base camp, along with the person that dropped her off and reported her missing. This made our job much easier, because we were able to readily identify the tire prints of the drop-off vehicle, along with her shoe print.

Tracking the subject back toward her campsite, we came upon her tracks exiting the creek side area. By 0300 Saturday morning the RMRU tracking team had tracked the subject back out to the road, and were absolutely certain the subject had departed the area.

The Sheriff's Office asked us to stay until daylight to search one more time. So we grabbed

less than an hours sleep and made another sweep of the area. Our conclusion was the same as before.

The area we were searching in was starting to get quite smoky, because the winds had changed and were blowing the fire toward us. We departed for the road-head to confer with the Deputy on the scene. We were told we could leave after we led a few more Sheriff's officers to the scene and explained our findings. After doing this, our trusty old command post vehicle wouldn't start. But with an hour of tinkering and some rather violent physical persuasion, it did finally start - *Certain team members believe that simply having this author on the search, was enough reason to cause the vehicle malfunction...*

Now with most team members present going on 28 hours, with only a brief nap in between, we were ready to leave for home. It was then we were informed that a fire fighter working the up-canyon wildfire had seen a woman of her description walking out the afternoon before.

Lessons For The Public:

The print left from a shoe can be a very valuable asset when tracking someone who is either lost, or believed to be lost. Leave an impression of your shoe print at home if your going hiking; Remember what kind of shoes or boots your companions are wearing; Draw a picture of the type of impression they leave in the dirt or sand. Should the need arise, anything you can do to gather information ahead of time will be of value to a rescuer.

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.