

Stranded Backpacker

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Skyline Trail below Palm Springs Tram

2006-020

by Patrick McCurdy

On Saturday, July 29th, Justin Ross and three friends set out on the Skyline Trail, a uniquely long and steep trail that leads 8,000' over about ten miles from Palm Springs into the gorgeous high country of the San Jacinto Mountains. While the top portion passes through the beautiful conifers of the San Jacinto State Park, the lower portions are extremely dry desert foothills and canyons. It is not a trail to be undertaken lightly. There is no water available anywhere on this trail this time of year.

Justin and his friends intended to spend one night out, continuing up the trail Sunday and taking the Palm Springs Tram back down to the desert that evening. At some point on Sunday Justin's friends ran low on water and turned back. Justin decided to continue on alone. By the time it turned dark he was out of food, drinking the last of his water, utterly exhausted, and not yet at the top. This section of trail is very steep and the trail is often hard to see even in the daytime. As he had cell phone coverage, he called his family and told them about his situation, then hunkered down in his sleeping bag for the night.

His mother called 911 and described her son's situation. The Riverside County Sheriff dispatched a helicopter to the area and it was able to visually locate Justin with a search light. As he was not injured and in no danger, the decision was made to call out RMRU first thing in the morning.

At about 0030 Monday morning we got the page: Lost backpacker near the tram, on a sixty degree slope, uninjured, but unable to move. Report to the tram at 0600.

At 0600 I met with some of the usual faces (Jim and Grace Manues, Gwenda Yates) at the tram, as well as an old hand I hadn't seen in a while (Rick Maschek), and two of our newest team members, Jacoba Leeuwen and Steve Gonzales. As we were expecting a technical rescue, we hauled our full compliment of ropes and technical rigging gear up the tram, Gwenda set up and ran the command post, while the rest of us headed out for the GPS coordinate thoughtfully provided by the Sheriff's helicopter. With the rest of the team on our heels, Jim Manues and I were first out of the chute at about 0645 and my GPS said .49 miles to Justin's location. We headed for an area we call the "Launching Pad," but which is actually the upper terminus of the Skyline Trail (aka Cactus to Clouds Trail), where my GPS said .33 miles to Justin. We all headed over the edge, down the quite steep slope of the upper portion of the trail and followed my GPS, which essentially told us

to follow the trail.

Whenever searching for a missing person, search teams stop frequently to call the person's name. We did so on this search, but got no response. As we continued on, and my GPS told me we were within .15 miles (about 800') of Justin's location, Jim and I became increasingly worried that we were getting no response when we called Justin's name. We worried that he might have fallen and that we would have to first search for him, then rescue a severely injured person. A radio call to base prompted Gwenda to call Justin on his cell phone. When asked if he heard us he said yes. When asked if he was responding he said no. Gwenda was finally able to convince him to respond and we heard him a short distance away and almost immediately spotted him sitting on the trail. He wasn't on a 60 degree slope, was ambulatory, and was in no danger.

Jim and I spent about 20 minutes with Justin, giving him food and water, as well as making sure he was uninjured and in good health. His only complaint was of very sore legs and that he was exhausted. Shortly thereafter, all of us started hiking back up the trail where we quickly ran into Rick, the rest of the team (who were very close behind us) having headed back to base when they heard they would not be needed. We were less than 1/2 mile from the tram, but the trail is quite steep at that point and Justin was moving slowly. After a short time Jim Manues took his pack for him, but that didn't seem to help much. It was a very slow hike back.

We got back to the upper tram station by about 0900 and it was a relief to dump the hundreds of feet of rope and pounds of technical rescue gear that had not been needed on this search and to get Justin back to safety.



Justin Ross with RMRU member Rick Maschek.

At one point Jim Manues mentioned to Justin that we had been afraid he would start moving at first light and that we would have a hard time locating him. "No way," replied Justin. "Then you wouldn't know where I was. If I move, you have to go searching for me." Ah, music to our ears. We couldn't have scripted those lines better ourselves. The very first rule when you become lost in the wilderness is "Stay put." Justin clearly understood this. The helicopter crew who spotted him the previous night gave us his GPS coordinates and finding him was a simple matter of entering those coordinates in a GPS and following the arrow on the unit as we watched the distance to target decrease. He may have misjudged the intensity of the Skyline Trail and the amount of water he would need, but he kept a cool head and did the right thing when he got into trouble. Justin's good sense was the main reason this

mission was complete in a little over two hours.

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.