

Missing Hiker

February 3, 2009
Suicide Rock/Humber Park
2009-001

Part 1, Tuesday, by Chad Marler

At 9:44 p.m. our team was called to search for a lost hiker who was believed to be near Suicide Rock. Lee Arson and I arrived to Humber Park where we were briefed by the attending Sheriff, who had spoken to the subject's concerned sister in Arizona, that the man in his mid 30's had left Humber Park at 11 a.m. and had expected to return to his car by 4 p.m. The subject had made a cell phone call around 1 p.m. that had "pinged" off a tower in Idyllwild and had placed the call 3.1 miles from that tower.

Lee and I knew that 3.1 miles placed him nowhere near Suicide Rock so we started up the Devils Slide Trail towards Saddle Junction. Approximately 3/4 mile up the trail we looked towards Suicide Rock where we spotted a light coming from near the top of the massive rock. We called out many times and did not get a response. Because this light was so obvious and clear to our eye we decided to head back down the trail and move towards Suicide Rock and investigate, keeping in mind that the original report was that our subjects destination was Suicide Rock.

Calling out along the way, Lee and I scrambled up snow covered rocks and logs along the climbers trail where we eventually reached the top of Suicide Rock. The light source was now gone and we failed to get a response which proved very frustrating. The time was 2 a.m. and we decided to clear Deer Springs Trail back to Highway 243. We called a Sheriff to provide a ride back to our vehicle and decided to call it a night around 4:30 a.m. The next morning the search continued and Lee and I, tired from the late night before, joined other team members. See below for details on February 4th.

Thoughts and critiques of this Tuesday night mission...

It is my opinion that we should have mapped out 3.1 miles from the Idyllwild cell phone tower (Which actually placed the subject near Willow Creek where he was extracted the next day) prior to starting our search. In hind sight, because we did not get a response from the top of Suicide Rock from Devils Slide Trail, we should have continued towards the saddle and not of turned back. Our thoughts at the time were the light was so obvious and it had to be investigated. To this day we still don't know what produced the light.

Part 2, Wednesday, by Pete Carlson

We arrived at Humber Park at 8 a.m. to search for a missing hiker who had been missing over night. Lee and I started up the Devil Slide Trail to the Saddle and then were going to search the valley systems to see if he had gone that way. Jim M, Chad, and Tom followed us up to the saddle and then headed up towards Tahquitz Peak. Grace and Lew headed up the climbers trail to Tahquitz Rock. We really had no clear idea where the hiker had gone and had conflicting reports from relatives. The upper part of the trail to the saddle was covered with hard snow and ice and is tricky to get up without failing. Once in the valley systems Lee and I went across the valleys looking for fresh prints and found none. During this time the subject had contacted his Mom by cell phone and said he was OK, but lost and could see a city in the desert. Grace and Lew had finished their assignment and went back to base. Then Lew, Jim B, and Ray went around and started up the South Ridge Trail. We also got help from the Desert Sheriff's Search and Rescue team (DSSAR). DSSAR members were sent to Gardner Valley to hike up to the PCT and look for any fresh prints on that trail. Also a DSSAR team covered the Ernie Maxwell Trail. Nothing was found by anyone. Using cell phone technology we found out a direction back from the cell tower to his phone. We then had the Riverside County Sheriff fly their helicopter along that line and sure enough they spotted the missing hiker way down in Tahquitz Canyon. They were able to pick him up and fly him back to base.

After talking to the subject we found out he had gone up the Devil Slide Trail and then started up to Tahquitz Peak. He stopped to eat and decide that it was getting late and he would go back. He could not find the trail from the rock he had lunch on and started back in what he thought was the correct direction. By 3 p.m. he knew he was going the wrong way, but was getting cold and wet in the snow, so he decided to follow a steam that would take him down out of the snow and back to a road. In the local mountains of southern California following a steam down to a road is the wrong thing to do. Most stream end up in steep canyons and it can be over 10 miles to get to a road. He did get down out of the snow and gathered fire wood and started a fire to dry out and keep warm. The next morning after no sleep, but warm, he started down Tahquitz Canyon. This canyon is 12-15 miles long and has many water falls over 100 feet. The hiker literally wore the soles off his hiking boots and then wore out his socks. When he was picked up he was hiking barefoot, still trying to get out.

It was hard to decide where to search on this one and we did not think the hiker would have gone that far based on first reports from relatives. We had other team members working base camp and several more arriving as he was found. We would not have found his tracks until the next day if the helicopter had not found him. All in all it was a good team effort with help from DSSAR and the Riverside Sheriff. The hiker was correct in going down to get out of the snow and starting a fire was a smart thing to do. But then he should have stayed with the fire and keep it going during the day making it smoke a lot. If he had done that he would have been picked up first thing in the morning by the helicopter, not late afternoon walking it bare feet.

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.