



Young Adult Male Lost on Mount San Jacinto

June 1, 2010

Mount San Jacinto

2010-012

Written by Tom Mahood

On Monday, May 31st, a group of college students from San Francisco headed up the Devils Slide trail from Humber Park. At about 12:30pm about a mile prior to reaching Saddle Junction, one member of their group was feeling extraordinarily fatigued and told the rest he would probably turn back. The others proceeded on. Upon their after-dark return, they found no trace of their friend, yet his car remained in the parking lot. They notified the Riverside Sheriff and spent until after 10pm calling out for him in the dark, to no avail.

RMRU responded very early Tuesday morning and sent Lee Arnson and Chad Marler up over Saddle Junction and in as far as Laws Camp and Willow Crossing. Paul Caraher remained at the Saddle to act as radio relay as Lee and Chad couldn't communicate directly with the RMRU command post set up at Humber Park and run by Gwenda Yates.

Preliminary information (later found to be wrong) was that the group had only gone in as far as Saddle Junction, spent time there, then descended, never seeing their companion. Indications were that the missing hiker had done some camping, but wasn't necessarily experienced in backcountry travel. At approximately 1:20pm on the day he was last seen, there was a cell tower ping at a Pine Cove cell tower which suggested he hadn't crossed over the saddle. His cell phone then had all calls going directly to voicemail and was unreachable. The 23 year old hiker was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, and had a day pack with a bottle of water and some Gatorade, along with a couple of Powerbars. His shoes were lightweight hiking boots.

Desert Search and Rescue (DSAR) was also activated and by late Tuesday morning had a four man team hiking from the upper Tramway down to Caramba. Hikers lost in that area often end up in the treacherous Caramba drainage as they are lured by the seemingly near lights of Palm Springs below. Additional DSAR members also arrived at Humber Park to help on that side of the mountain.

By mid-morning, Tom Mahood and Lew Kingman arrived and proceeded up Devil's

Slide trail to search the older, abandoned portions of the trail. Once there, they met up with Lee, Chad and Paul, who were returning from higher up. They then performed something of a line search, descending directly down the slopes to Strawberry Creek, and afterward returned to Humber Park. While this group was heading down, Jeri Sanchez, along with Ed Gomez (of DSAR) returned to Saddle Junction and checked out the trail towards Tahquitz Peak. Throughout much of the day, Les Walker provided a communications link via cell phone at his home, to the DSAR group operating out of the upper tram station, as cell phones were the only way to coordinate with them.

Finding no trace of the missing hiker seemed very strange, since getting lost on the Devil's Slide trail on a holiday with many people around would be quite difficult. But 24 hours had now passed since the hiker was last seen and concern was quickly rising.

Starting about 2:00pm on Tuesday, the Riverside Sheriff's helicopter, Star 9, spent the remainder of the afternoon searching the area around Devil's Slide, then across the high country and out past Caramba with no results. Plans were being made for a night mission using FLIR for infrared searching.

Around 6pm as the search operation was starting to gear up into a multiagency effort, word came over the radio that the missing hiker had just arrived at the tram station and the search was over. Most team members were stunned that he could have made it that far, but were thrilled to hear the good news. Since the helicopter was still in the air, it diverted to the Tramway to pick up the subject and return him for a debrief to Humber Park where his friends and family were waiting. RMRU was more than a little interested to hear how he got to the tram.



Tracing the Subject's Route

photo by Jeri Sanchez

A map was laid out on a vehicle and while talking with the subject RMRU tried to piece together the subject's travels. It turned out that his group's destination was actually San Jacinto Peak, not just the saddle or Tahquitz Peak as the early information had indicated. The subject, who did not have a map (!) decided to try and catch up to his group. He apparently was able to follow the trail to Wellman's Divide and then up to the peak, reaching it right at sunset. Somehow he never met his party, and at that late time never saw anyone else. He did not have a flashlight. His intent was to return the way he came, but appeared to have lost the trail, and continued to follow the drainage downhill. This generally gets you back to the upper tram station, which is what RMRU assumed the scenario to be. Somewhere along this route, the subject spent a cold night out (he did in fact have a jacket along).

The subject then mentioned he got to a point where he could see the "bottom of the tram" and started towards the tram, so he sort of knew where he was. This puzzled the RMRU members, as the locations where the bottom of the tram was visible tend to be over towards the top of the Skyline Trail, and it wasn't likely he walked past the tram station.

As the questions continued, mouths started to fall open and there were shocked looks all around. Everyone assumed he had walked into the upper tram station. He hadn't. He walked into the LOWER tram station! Somewhere between Cornell Peak and the upper station, he went over the north side and started down, not knowing how close to the

upper tram station he actually was. Eventually he found himself under the tram cables and made it down Chino Canyon towards the lower station (with the scratches to his legs to prove it) and was picked up by tram security near Tower 1. He was able to find plenty of water due to the snowmelt and the water in the canyon. Everyone on RMRU was stunned. No one had ever heard of a lost hiker ever making a trip anything like this. He made it up to San Jacinto from Humber Park, in the snow, then cross-country down to the lower tram station. An incredible journey in itself and all the more amazing that he was able to do it without serious injury.

RMRU members present: Lee Arnson, Paul Caraher, Glenn Henderson, Mike Herman, Lew Kingman, Tom Mahood, Chad Marler, Nick Nixon, Jeri Sanchez, Les Walker and Gwenda Yates.

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.