



Missing Persons

April 12, 2014

Marion Mountain Trailhead

2014-011

Written by Helene Lohr

After a long hard work week, it was finally time for a night out. Dinner down in the desert had been great. It was a long winding back up the mountain, but it was worth it. An hour later I could still taste the lingering flavor of Duck confit with chanterelles in my mouth as we pulled with a gravelly crunch into the driveway. Now, all I was looking forward to was a hot bath and warm bed. I had just unclipped my seatbelt when a new text chimed out. I turn to Lee, eyes suddenly bright and wide: “We have a mission!”

Two lost hikers at Marion Mountain. Dang, this could be a big one! Marion Mountain is one of the steepest trails in the area. It is notorious for sending people down its offshoots into deep, dark, dangerous canyons. Over the years we’ve rescued many people from its grasp, and it’s usually been a doozy of a mission. We’d better prep for an overnighter for sure. Instead of jumping in the bath, I head directly for the rescue room. In a matter of minutes we pull on our uniforms, cross check our gear and backpacks, and are ready to head out. I grab an extra radio for the deputy and I’m out the door.

I toss my backpack in the bed of the truck and hop in. Lee speeds up the 243 towards the mission base location marked by a google pin drop. On the way we get the news that RMRU members Cameron and Kevin are on their way here. Turning off the main highway we wind our way along the pockmarked and potholed asphalt back towards the Marion Mountain trailhead. As we approach we can see the Sheriff’s lights ahead, red and blue flashes piercing the pitch black, illuminating the pines in an eerie dance of color. Dispatch is on the radio with the deputy. One of the subjects has managed to get weak cell-service and is on the phone describing their location. The deputy slowly repeats the conversation to us. “They’re at a campground with water towers nearby”. Lee’s eyes light up immediately. “I know where they are!”

“Sound the siren!” Lee suggests to the deputy. A loud whoop comes from the car. A couple of seconds later, confirmation from dispatch: The subjects have heard the siren. Perfect! Lee and I grin at each other. We won’t even need our backpacks for this one. He turns to me: “They’re at the old campground” that makes sense- it’s still closed this early

in the season. They could've gotten sidetracked on their way back down, found an old campsite and decided to stick it out somewhere that seems at least somewhat civilized. We ask the deputy to wait. "This won't take long". A quick eight minute march up a steep hillside covered in slippery pine duff, and we see the glow of a fire ahead illuminating up the trees in a warm circle of light. "Hello!" We yell out as a greeting. Excited yells greet us back.

As we approach I see two people huddled near the inviting blaze of a fire ring. Our subjects are ecstatic to see us. A quick set of introductions goes around before we get to the meat of the interview. Ron and Diana started out separately that day. She was part of a hiking meet up group and he was travelling on his own near the group. The Meet up group had asked people to pick a hiking buddy. Through an understandable mix up Diana had chosen Ron as her partner and only realized much later that he was not part of the group. Still, they had a great hike up to the peak but ended up making it back down in the fading twilight. They had both made some of the classic mistakes that tend to get hikers in trouble. Neither one had counted on staying out so late. They had underestimated the length of the hike, had not brought extra provisions, not familiarized themselves with the trailhead, and they had no source of light between them. In the fading light at the end of the hike they got off the trail, but managed to make it back down. Unfortunately the simple map they had showed only the trails without the topography. (This is good reason to have a topo map and know how to read it.) Once off trail, they had no way to find the location of their cars. The darkness made everything unfamiliar and they weren't even sure they were in the right area on the mountain. "I had figured our car was over that way", Ron said pointing North in the direction of Dark Canyon. "But she insisted we stay put".

"I'm glad they did." If they had headed off that way they would be lost in the middle of a tangle of deep dark ravines and thick brush right now. No cell service there! Our job would've gotten a whole heck of a lot harder. An amazingly simple search of several minutes would have morphed into long hours or even days, with a large potential of our subjects becoming injured, hypothermic and/or severely dehydrated. Luckily for us all, they decided to hunker down instead. Diana had brought some matches for the fire and they both had jackets which helped keep them warm.

"Well, let's get you back". Lee puts out the fire. I stamp out the last embers with my heavy leather boots. We each hand out one of our many spare headlamps for the subjects to use. As we walk back, I review a few of the lessons of the night. Our new friends readily confirm they will not be heading out without their full set of ten essentials again, especially their not going without headlamps and a good map! A short hike down the slope and we hit the pockmarked road leading to their cars. In a couple minutes, we see flashing lights illuminating the road ahead. We hand them off to the deputy.

They'll have an exciting story for friends and family. They were lucky- they had all the ingredients for things to go horribly wrong, but got a brief adventure and a good lesson instead.

RMRU Members Involved: Lee Arnson, Cameron Dickinson, Donny Goetz, Kevin Kearn, and Helene Lohr.

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.