



Missing Peak Hiker

July 2, 2014
Tamarack Valley Area
2014-028

Written by Eric Holden

You never know what a mission will be like.....

At 11pm I get the page that we need a hasty team to book it to the tram to search for a missing hiker. I kiss my wife goodnight and head out the door for the 90 minute drive to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. When arriving at the parking lot I see fellow RMRU member Cameron gearing up. We meet the Sheriff's deputy at the lower tram station and get the information on our missing subject. A 46 year old named James Jeselson, from New York, was last seen between Wellman's Divide and Round Valley. He did not know the area, didn't have a map, compass or any other survival gear, but did have a bottle of booze. We had a cell phone ping but it put him 8.5 miles south of the tram, very far from the last known position.

Thanks to the Tramway for staying till 1am to give us a lift to Mountain Station. Once at top we got into contact with the State Park rangers who were already in the field near the Hidden Lake area heading south towards the cell phone ping. They recommended we check out Round and Tamarack Valley, we agreed and off we went. We took the main trail towards Round Valley Campground and gave shout outs every few hundred feet. About an hour later after one of our many shouts we heard the faintest of replies. It was very difficult to discern the direction. We went about a tenth of a mile back down the trail, our best guess, and could no longer make contact. Back to our original location and got a response again. We set off in another best guess, this time cross country, and after a few hundred feet we got stronger response to our shout out. Excellent! We are heading in the right direction.

The next 30 minutes involved cross country travel through Round Valley, Tamarack Valley and then finally up Cornell Peak. We started to smell smoke from what I figured was a campfire he started. We turned off our lights and could see the glow from his campfire in the treetops a couple hundred more feet up Cornell. We hiked up over a small ridge and were met by a startling sight! It was not a campfire but a forest fire!



Cameron with Fire Burning
Photo by Eric Holden.

About a 40ft by 20ft section of forest was currently burning with at least one tree on fire. Cameron radioed into base and let the deputy know that we had a sizable fire up here. I spotted the subject across the burn area and crossed through it to get to him. He was shaken up pretty badly and I did a quick medical evaluation on him. He had a bad (2nd Degree) burn on his finger, was dehydrated but otherwise in good condition. He showed no signs of intoxication. I wrapped his finger to protect it on the hike out and he drank a liter of water pretty quick. Cameron and I went up to see what we could do about the fire. After about 30 second of trying to put it out we realized that there was nothing we could do for something this big. We went a few hundred feet from the fire and spoke with James a little more. Turns out that he had turned around about halfway up to Wellman's Divide and then on his way back down he made a left at the water spigot instead of a right. He followed the trails until they disappeared past Tamarack Valley Campground and then he started heading up to get a better visual on where he was. He had found an old tent that he set up and had hung the rain fly out to be seen by searchers. He pointed it out but we could not spot it till he said look higher. He had climbed up 25 feet into a tree and hung the rain fly at the top.

His big mistake happened when he decided to light a signal fire. He started the fire on a rock outcropping. While it was burning it collapsed down the rock face and spread to all of the brush and trees below. He quickly used up all his water trying to put out the fire and spent the next few hours trying to contain it. He eventually heard our shouts. Luckily there was virtually no wind that night and the fire did not spread much. We hiked him back down the main trail and got back to the Long Valley Ranger's Station about 4:00am.

The two State Park Rangers had made it back and were waiting for us. We spoke with them and they headed off towards the fire while we returned to the tram station. Air crews would later perform water drops on the fire after the sun came out.



Cameron, Subject, and Eric
Photo by Tram Employee.

We stayed up the rest of the night and eventually took the first tram back down the mountain. I highly recommend to James that he let EMTs take a look at his finger. He declined medical treatment and said he would take care of it himself. James went into the back country without any of the proper tools that would have let him find his way back out. He had no light source, map, compass, G.P.S., or warm clothing. Luckily it was a warm night. He started a fire in some of the driest conditions Southern California has seen and it quickly got out of control. The largest fire in Californian history was started the same way (out of control signal fire). The low winds and the quick work of the State Park Rangers kept the fire from spreading before aviation could knock it down.

Thanks to the State Park Rangers and the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway!

RMRU Members Involved: Cameron Dickinson and Eric Holden.

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.