



Female Lost Tahquitz Peak

December 06, 2014
Saddle Junction Area
2014-048

Written by Kevin Kearn

The Riverside County Sheriff activated RMRU on Saturday evening, at 1845 to search for a missing female in the vicinity of Tahquitz peak north of Idyllwild. The 45 year old subject had been hiking with a male companion when she went to relieve herself off the trail somewhere between Tahquitz Peak and Saddle Junction at approximately 1330. Although weather conditions were clear with temperatures in the low 50's and little wind, she became disoriented and moved further away from the trail and got lost. Her male companion attempted to locate her for an hour before deciding to leave. He had contact with her via text messages until her phone went dead a very short time afterwards.

The male companion descended to Idyllwild Ranger Station via Saddle Junction and Devil's Slide Trail where he reported her missing at approximately 1630 hours. The Ranger station personnel contacted the Riverside Sherriff and deputies responded. After interviewing the male companion who claimed to have met her on the internet, examining his cell phone, and confirming the subject's car was still in Humber Park, they alerted RMRU.

Glenn led the operation and was first to arrive at Humber Park with the RMRU truck at 1940 hours. Shortly thereafter, the Riverside Sherriff also mobilized Desert Search and Rescue (DSAR) to also join the search. Cameron , Ray, and I all arrived by 2115 when temperatures had dropped into the low 40s in Idyllwild and low 30s at Saddle Junction. Cameron and Ray were operating on little sleep, having supported the rescue of two subjects at the Tramway the night before. Glenn briefed us on the mission and we distributed equipment which included extra clothing for the subject, radios, callout ropes, an enhanced medical kit, and extra water. Glenn planned to insert our three-man team initially into Skunk Cabbage Meadow, then have us sweep south, west of Hill 8042, along the Pacific Crest Trail to Little Tahquitz Valley ,then southwest to the Tahquitz North Ridge trail, and then north to the Saddle Junction.

As our team moved to stage at Keenwild Helipad, elements from DSAR began arriving; initially instructed to launch from the Palm Springs Tram Station and sweep south, Glenn

redirected them to clear the Devil's Slide trail from Humber Park to the Saddle. By 2215 hours, the Sheriff's Helicopter (Star-9) had lifted our three man- team individually into the Skunk Cabbage Meadows Landing Zone and we were calling out for the subject while Star- 9 conducted visual search with night vision goggles. Nearly 100% illumination from the full moon provided excellent conditions to observe terrain. Zero winds improved the effectiveness of our shouting out and ability to listen for responses, especially when Star-9 was away from our area.



Freshly Drawn Arrow
Photo by Kevin Kearns.

Soon after, Donny and Kirk arrived to form RMRU's second team. Glenn directed them to search and clear the South Ridge Trail from Idyllwild to Tahquitz Peak. Approximately 500 feet south of the trail intersection on Pacific Crest Trail in Tahquitz Valley, we discovered a freshly drawn arrow in the dirt pointing north (opposite our direction of our travel). We agreed it was fresh and with the absence of any discernible tracks, thought it might be our subject's. After reporting the discovery, our team reversed direction and began sweeping north where arrow pointed, towards the Saddle Junction. At Saddle Junction, we interviewed two campers who reported seeing the male companion earlier in the day and indicated that he had been looking for the subject. At Saddle Junction, our team turned south to clear the North Ridge Trail all the way to the lookout tower on Tahquitz Peak.

While our team cleared the North Ridge, Donny and Kirk continued to approach from the South. DSAR's 5-man team closed on the Saddle after which two members went back down; three remaining DSAR members proceeded to clear from Saddle Junction east to

Reed's Camp and then to Law's Camp. Star-9 scoured the Pacific Coast Trail from Saddle Junction to Wellman Divide. At 0215 hours our three-man team completed reconnaissance of the Lookout Tower atop Tahquitz Peak (8,828 feet) with nothing significant to report. We could hear the call outs from Donny and Kirk approaching the summit from the south. DSAR had finished their reconnaissance as well and Glenn was analyzing options to continue searching or to rest the teams until dawn.

Star-9 made another check of Caramba area, the eastern side of the San Jacinto Wilderness that drops off into hazardous canyons. By luck, Helicopter Crew observed the glint of the reflective material on the subject's shoelaces in the steep section of the Tahquitz Creek east of Caramba Camp in the deep canyon before a steep and impassable (without technical equipment) drop off. They confirmed it was our subject at the bottom by a stream. Aside from a pinkish hat, she wore a black long sleeve top and bottoms which made her difficult to detect below the trees in the darkness.

The narrow canyon with steep sides and trees made it extremely challenging to conduct a safe hoist so the plan was to pick Cameron and me up from Tahquitz peak and insert us into an Landing Zone about a half mile from the subject. We checked to be sure we had the correct equipment with Ray, who stayed at the tower to serve as the radio relay between Star-9 and RMRU Base, since the subject's remote location exceeded line of sight communications. After Cameron and I reached the subject's location, Donny from the second team approaching up the South Ridge, made it to Ray's location at the Lookout Tower. At that time, Glenn put out the order to withdraw all remaining elements in the field back to Idyllwild.

Eric Hannum Technical Flight Officer (TFO), part of the Star-9 flight crew that night, passed the coordinates to Cameron and me after inserting us individually at 0240 hours. They also illuminated the area ahead of us to 'paint' the spot where the subject was. We moved rapidly from the Landing Zone to the stream in the canyon but were slowed down considerably after that. Steep, slippery terrain above the stream with significant debris made it difficult to traverse safely.

We found our subject in good condition but took a few minutes to check her out; she was cold though not yet hypothermic; however, her feet were soaked. We dried and warmed her feet, changed her socks and later wrapped plastic bags over her socks before putting her feet back in her shoes. We got her into a down jacket as well as gloves and she seemed to warm up quickly with some food and water. She was capable of continuing to move and we coordinated with Star-9 to pick us up at a new, closer Landing Zone in one hour. Star-9 flew away at 0315 hours. We proceeded to climb back up the walls of the canyon to our initial crossing point. We were fortunate in that the subject was an avid runner, carrying virtually nothing, and motivated to get out. I went first to find a safe route and clear brush while the subject followed. Cameron went last and ensured the

subject was not only safe but felt safe – particularly in steep slippery sections of the canyon. Cameron actually got below her and placed and held her feet in sections while she traversed.

After crossing the stream at the point where we could exit the canyon again, we climbed higher to the coordinates Star-9 had passed for the alternate Landing Zone. Within 5 minutes of our arrival at 0410, Star-9 returned but reported that they could not land in the designated location; they requested that we move to the original insertion Landing Zone across a nearby ridge. They landed and waited the ten minutes for us to come to their location. Star-9 lifted the subject and Cameron out first at 0425 hours and then came back for me. We landed back at Keenwild Helipad where Glenn, Riverside deputies, and Idyllwild Fire Paramedics had gathered. Paramedics promptly put the subject on a gurney and proceeded to further warm and treat her with IVs in the back of their ambulance. The subject got a picture of herself and the pilots. We turned our equipment in and after a quick debrief with Glenn and the team, ended the mission.

Key Points:

If you get lost, stay put. Rescuers will more easily find you the less you move away from your last known location. The subject's decision to move greatly complicated the search effort. See last mission 2014-047 where the subjects stayed put and the mission was over very quickly.

Always bring extra (warm) clothing – and particularly a shell. The subject was fortunate that there was no wind that night, which had there been, would have ripped the heat off her damp body and likely caused hypothermia and possibly death. This would have happened even faster had there been rain.

Try not to dress like a Ninja. Wear bright clothing so you can be easily located. Bring a whistle and a flashlight even on daytrips. Try to blow a whistle every 2 minutes; it carries much farther than your voice and you won't get as tired. These devices coupled with bright clothing will dramatically increase your chances of being detected and found.

If you have a cell phone, conserve your power. Turn it on only when you have a signal and off when you don't. Generally, if you get to high ground and turn your phone on, you can communicate with authorities and they have the ability to get permission to obtain a general location of your phone.

Know your hiking partner. Stick together and have a plan if you should become separated.

RMRU Members Involved: Kirk Cloyd, Cameron Dickinson, Donny Goetz, Kevin

Kearn, Glenn Henderson, Kevin Kearn, and Ray Weden.

DSAR Members Involved: Mike Calhoun, Chris Miller, Beau Potter, Sharon Ollenburger, Chris Stevens, and Kevin Wahlstrom.

Sheriff's Aviation: (Pilot - Chad Marlett) (TFO - Eric Hannum)

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.