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## Lost Hikers

**January 09, 2015  
Tenaja Trail Head  
2015-004**

Written by Raymond Weden

It's Friday night and a good majority of the team is getting our gear prepared for our "Winter Shakedown" training scheduled for 0730 on Saturday morning. This training marks the time for us to use our snowshoes, crampons, ice axes, and other winter gear that have been collecting dust for the last 3 seasons. Due to the lack of snow in our local mountains, it has been a couple of years since been able to truly have this training.

Shortly after 2200 a call came in for two lost teenagers near the Tenaja Trail Head in the Cleveland National Forest. The recorded message we call in to get the initial details for the search ended with "...and sorry about the training". Bummer... I still held out some hope that we would find them quickly and be able to still have this training as schedule. The adrenaline is starting to kick in and it is time to roll. I was the first on scene from RMRU followed almost immediately by Cameron, Glenn, Donny and Carlos. When I arrived, several RSO Deputies and US Forest Service were already at the trail head. We also had the luxury of an RSO Aviation Unit flying overhead searching for our lost subjects. The two teenagers, one male, Matthew, 19 and one female, Alyssa, 17, were going on a short hike in the afternoon and then off to a movie later that evening. We positively ID their car in the parking lot so we knew where at the starting point of their journey. We were informed that they set out at approximately 1430. Both of their parents showed up on scene as we were preparing to insert in to the field. They gave us information on what the teenagers were wearing; the type of shoe the male subject was wearing being a very valuable clue.

Cameron and I became "Team 1" and started off down the Tenaja Trail South as it is the main trail head out of the parking lot and their assumed path of travel. Donny and Carlos became "Team 2" and drove up the Fisherman's Camp Trail Head with the intentions of then picking up the Tenaja Falls Trail at the Fisherman's Camp intersection. Glenn was in the RMRU truck as mobile communication driving up and down Wildomar Road to ensure we stayed in radio range. At Fisherman's Camp, Team 2 came across some campers who positively ID'd our missing subjects and said they did not go north towards Tenaja Falls (the more popular route) but headed west on the San Mateo Trail. This was confirmed by no sign of fresh track heading north so Team 2 pushed west. They also confirmed the time that they saw them around 1630.



Subjects Shoe Print  
Photo by Donny.

Cameron and I were about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile south of Fisherman's when we heard on the radio that team 2 was going down the San Mateo Trail. We stepped up our pace and radioed over to "Team 2" suggesting we join up as there are several trail intersections off of the San Mateo Trail. Just before merging with them Donny radioed in that he has a fresh track matching the male subject's description given by his father. More confident we were on their heels we pushed on our heads down looking for fresh tracks. At each trail intersection we spent additional time looking for clues to determine their path of travel.

It was pushing 0400 when we hit the intersection of the Bluewater Trail. We spent some significant time here as their tracks disappeared with very thick overgrowth. These trails are pretty far back in the hills and are not used regularly. In part of the briefing we received from the Deputies and the Forrest Service we were told Alyssa made a brief cell phone call stating that they have been heading up hill for a very long time. Though searching a few hundred yards down both trails yielded no significant clues, the four of us decided to head up the Bluewater trail. The sign post marking the Bluewater trail said something about "hard – 1800ft elevation gain". This could be that hill she was talking about...

Shortly after pressing on up the Bluewater trail, we were told that Orange County Sheriff's Department was assisting in this search with their Airship – Duke1. As they were heading to our location they radioed that they had someone on the ground flashing a light at them. They found a place to land and confirmed that these were our lost teenagers! They were cold and tired, but otherwise unharmed and in good spirits. They were flown over to the trail head where it all started and dropped off. Before heading up the hill, we marked a location that could be a possible Landing Zone (LZ) if a helicopter needed to land. We were about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from there. Knowing our Matthew and Alyssa were safe, we turned and headed for the (LZ) and awaited our pickup. The

additional team of Eric and Kirk that were on their way to assist were told to head back home.



Donny, Subjects, Carlos, Ray, and Cameron  
Photo by Glenn.

Even “short” hikes like this one was supposed to be can turn in to search and rescue situation if you are not prepared. Here are some key tips that would have helped in this situation:

Know when the sun goes down and set a turnaround time. Our subjects left at 1430 and arrived at their first major intersection at 1630 - two hours later. The sun sets in this area around 1700. If they hit the camp and immediately turned around they would have to walk an hour and half in the dark.

Bring a Flashlight with Extra Batteries. Leaving as late as they did a flashlight is a must have. Though this is what ultimately led to their rescue, your cell phone does not count because more often than not it will be out of batteries when you need it most. Even if you leave at first light, it is always smart to have a flashlight as you never know what can happen.

Bring a Map, Compass and GPS. Ultimately it came down to the simple fact that they were lost. You also need to know how to use these tools. Though a GPS is a great tool, when the batteries die, it is just dead weight so always carry paper maps.

**RMRU Members Involved:** Carlos Carter, Kirk Cloyd, Cameron Dickinson, Donny Goetz, Glenn Henderson, Eric Holden, and Raymond Weden.

**Orange County Sheriff's Aviation:** (Pilot - J. Eanes) (TFO - E Baum)

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.