

UPDATED: Gila hikers recount blizzard survival (2:39 p.m.)

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Updated at 2:35 p.m.:

SILVER CITY - After being missing in the Gila for nine days, Robert Fritz and his son Austin, 15, were found alive and well on Tuesday morning. The pair survived a blizzard that dropped nearly two feet of snow on the area and freezing temperatures that dipped to 15 below zero on Saturday night. Fritz said he and his son started out for a five-day backpacking trip the day after Christmas and were doing fine until the snow started on Wednesday night.

"We were making five and a half to six miles a day," he said.

But by Thursday morning, with more than two feet of snow on the ground, their progress became more difficult.

"Thursday morning we had to knock snow off the tent so it wouldn't collapse," he said. "That morning we got up and got a late start and started trying to post hole through the snow." After slogging through the snow for just a couple of miles, Fritz said they stopped and set up camp for the night. "On Friday we got up earlier and started again but after an hour it became obvious it wasn't going to be possible to hike out." The pair were still about ten miles in, Fritz said, and that's when Austin started feeling ill.

"He was having trouble holding anything down, so we fixed a campsite and hunkered down," he said. "By Sunday he had stopped (getting sick) but by then he hadn't eaten anything since Friday so he couldn't hike out so that's when we started hoping for rescue because I couldn't think of anyway to go and get help without leaving him, and I didn't want to do that." The two had stayed in the same place since Friday night and weren't lost, he said. "I've been out here a lot of times," he said. "I know the trails real well and I'm in real good health. If my son had been able to hold anything down we would have continued."

Fritz said he was worried that rescuers might not find them but said if worse came to worst he would have hiked out and gone for help for his son.

"I've been doing this for 28 years so I was able to take care of my son and that was my priority," he said.

Around 10 a.m. Tuesday morning Fritz said he was able to flag down a helicopter that had been searching for them.

"The first time they didn't see me but the second time they did," he said.

The pair were not out of food and had enough fuel in their camp stove to continue to make snow into water, so they were not suffering from the effects of dehydration. Fritz said he thought his son getting sick was related to the cold weather.

"We we got a clear bill of health from the EMTs," Fritz said.

At 2 p.m. on Tuesday, Fritz and his son were getting ready to head back to their car and drive back to El Paso, he said.

UPDATE: 12:36 p.m.

Missing hikers Robert Fritz and his son Austin have been found alive in the Gila wilderness, after being missing since the day after Christmas.

"They are cold but they are both concious, both able to move on their own and they got a helicopter ride out of the wilderness," said incident commander Bob Rogers.

The pair have reportedly been transported by air to the visitors' center where they are reportedly in good condition.

UPDATE: 11:22 a.m.

There has been a possible sighting from the air, of at least one of the missing hikers, possibly the father, Robert Fritz, according to Peter Olson with the state Department of Public Safety.

Searchers on the ground continue to make their way toward the subject.

Check back for updates as they become available.

SILVER CITY - State police search and rescue teams still are looking for a father and son from Texas who didn't return when expected from a five-day hiking trip in the Gila Cliff Dwellings area of southwestern New Mexico.

The area was hit by a winter storm Dec. 30, three days after 55-year-old Robert Fritz, a physicist from El Paso, and his 15-year-old son, Austin, began their backpacking trip.

Fritz's friend and former colleague from the El Paso Cancer Treatment Center, Robert Marshall, said Fritz is a very experienced hiker and has hiked all over the country and extensively in Colorado.

Everybody at his work is very concerned, he said.

Marshall said while Fritz would often go hiking he wouldn't necessarily leave a specific itinerary.

Searchers are continuing to look for the missing pair today, said incident commander Bob Rogers.

Search and rescue commander Marc Levesque says the El Paso residents were due back Friday night or Saturday. They did not leave an itinerary. Authorities say the father and son had a tent, sleeping bags, ground pads and food for five days.

The search was launched Sunday after a family member called authorities. Searchers remained in the field Monday night with a plane and helicopter looking for any campfires.

State Police Lt. Eric Garcia says more teams plan to help with the search Tuesday, including a National Guard helicopter crew.

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