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Missing hiker heading back to civilization

By Christine Steele Sun-News Bureau Chief

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SILVER CITY -- Rescue workers have confirmed that the man they spotted from a helicopter Thursday afternoon was missing hiker Ross Mason.

The Houston man had been missing since Tuesday, after he missed a check-in call with his long-time college friend and co-worker, Will Lidell. Search and rescue volunteers began looking for Mason late Tuesday afternoon after they found his rental car parked at TJ Corral, and after Lidell confirmed that Mason had missed his flight from El Paso to Houston.

Mason had left Nov. 5 on a solo hike that was to take him on a 25-mile round trip on the the Big Bear Loop. Lidell said his friend was an experienced hiker but had never hiked in the Gila before.

Late Thursday afternoon, rescue workers flying over the area in a helicopter spotted the S.O.S. message Mason had spelled out on the ground in colored clothing.

Five National Guardsman and three Forest Service personnel on horseback reached Mason Friday morning, where he had made camp at White Creek Cabin, about 21 miles up the West Fork from the Cliff Dwellings.

"We've got him," said incident commander Rueben Gonzales.

The rescuers planned to stay at the cabin with Mason and begin trekking out this morning.

"Everybody's tired. It's been a long hike," Gonzales said. "They were hiking almost all night. Since it's so rough, we decided to keep them there overnight and have them hike out in the morning."

It was late Thursday afternoon when searchers on horseback over at Pryor Cabin were alerted that Mason had been spotted.

"They got to him about 10:30 this morning," Gonzales said Friday.

Mason was reportedly in good shape, Gonzales said.

"As far as we know he was just a little bit dehydrated," he said. "He was happy to see the riders."

Today at daybreak, a horse and rider and a pack horse will head up to meet the National Guardsman, and Forest Service personnel, along with Mason, who will be hiking down from White Creek Cabin. Up toward McKenna Park, the group will meet up with the rider and empty pack horse and unload some of their gear and lighten their load so they can come out a lot faster, Gonzales said.

Gonzales said he has had spotty radio contact with the rescuers and Mason's mother and sister were there.

"They know he is safe and he's going to be OK, but he hasn't actually talked to them," Gonzales said.

More than 35 searchers from Grant County Search and Rescue, White Mountain Search and Rescue, Organ Mountain Technical Rescue, Mesilla Valley Search and Rescue, a Borstar team from the U.S. Border Patrol, along with National Parks Service employees from the Cliff Dwellings and the U.S. Forest Service for the Gila, as well as 12 National

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Guardsman from Las Cruces and Rio Rancho and New Mexico State Police all participated in the search.

Mason's friend Lidell, who was prepared to fly out to Silver City today, said he is relieved and grateful that his friend has been found safe.

"We are incredibly grateful to all the search and rescue folks," he said. "It's been a stressful time for everybody."

Lidell also wanted to acknowledge Larry Frost of Blue Sky Aviation, who Lidell was going to hire to begin searching for Mason had he not been found by today.

"He was going to pick me up in El Paso, offer me a free place to stay, pick up an expert guide and plot out a search map, and hit the air. That's an extraordinary kindness that we won't forget," Lidell said. "I offered to pay him for whatever time he put in so far and he refused payment."

Anna Luckenbach, 40, is in an outdoors group with Mason back in Houston called Bayou City Outdoors. She said she and other members of the club heard that their friend was missing late Tuesday after a backpacking class with club members.

"We talked about what to do when backpacking solo and it sounded like Ross did all those things," she said.

Luckenbach said some of those bullet points are: Know your trail well, check in with the ranger, explain to the ranger where you are going, and have an emergency contact.

Another member and friend of Mason's, Marjorie Cohen, posted the news on Facebook and word was quickly spreading among the 1,000 members of the

club.

"Most of us were just praying for his safe return and sending positive energy to the area," she said. "I don't think we were really worried because we know what a level-headed guy he is and he wouldn't do something dangerous."

Luckenbach was unclear on Mason's condition and when she was told how rugged the area was and that Mason and his rescuers were staying put through the night and were going to have to hike out this morning, she choked back tears.

"We're so thankful for all the people who have helped him," she said. "There are so many of us in Houston that were worried. We're trying to decide if the protocol is to hug him first then kick his ass or what."

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