

Robert Sumrall

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Robert Sumrall is a man who in 2009 survived being lost in the Gila National Forest in southwestern New Mexico for 7 days enduring sub-freezing weather conditions without food, water, or camping gear. ^[1]

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Reported missing

A resident of El Paso, Texas, he traveled to Emory Pass in the Black Range east of Silver City, New Mexico. There, he set out alone on Saturday, November 28 for a day hike, planning to return home that night. When he did not return his family was concerned but waited until Sunday morning to call authorities. Filing a missing person report and looking for Sumrall's vehicle used up precious hours. Police found the vehicle at the trailhead in Emory Pass at 8,228 feet (2,508 m) elevation. In accord with New Mexico state law,^[2] finding the vehicle at a trailhead triggered activation of volunteer search and rescue (SAR) resources affiliated with New Mexico State Police. SAR field teams began searching late Sunday afternoon.^[3] Grant County Search and Rescue (based in Silver City) was soon joined by Organ Mountain Technical Rescue and Mesilla Valley Search and Rescue (Las Cruces)^[4] Additional SAR resources were called from Alamogordo and Ruidoso as well as the United States National Guard, United States Border Patrol, United States Forest Service officers, and others.^[4] Searching continued through Sunday night to Monday evening, when it was suspended overnight due to dangerous weather. It resumed Tuesday morning and was still ongoing on Friday afternoon when Sumrall was found.

Sumrall, age 67, left home dressed in shorts and a sweatshirt, taking with him a small supply of warmer clothes and food and water, and his dog Zulu.^[3]

Initial search efforts concentrated on where Sumrall had said he planned to hike: the Emory Pass Vista trail, a trail running north and south along the crest of the Black Range. On Sunday night snow began to fall on the Black Range. More than 10 inches (25 cm) of snow fell in the search area Sunday through Tuesday, temperatures were in the upper 20s °F (high −0s °C) to lower 30s °F (low 0s °C), and wind gusts up to 20 miles per hour (32 km/h) contributed wind chill and poor visibility.^[4] These conditions limited the searchers' efforts, and the snow obscured any tracks or other signs of Sumrall's passage. On Tuesday evening fresh tracks were found on other trails. Those trails had cabins on them, raising hopes that the tracks were Sumrall's and that he would find shelter and survive.^[3] Incident Commander Reuben Gonzales said teams searching through Tuesday night in knee-deep snow found new tracks but were not sure the tracks belonged to Sumrall because a Border Patrol search dog team had also been in the area.^[5]

On Wednesday Gonzales interviewed someone who had talked to Sumrall on Saturday morning. Based on information obtained from the interviewee, search efforts on Thursday and Friday were concentrated on an area west of the crest trail, south of Iron Creek Campground, south of Emory Pass, and would include Sawyer's Peak and a trail that goes to Tierra Blanca Canyon, on the east side of the crest.^[5]

Rescue

Sumrall was found late Friday afternoon, by two horse riders who were aware of but not involved in the search. The riders were ranchers on their way to round up some cattle. Sumrall was lying in wet sand under a tree in a small arroyo beside a cabin. His dog Zulu lay against him. He was wearing jeans and a thin windbreaker and coat. Barely conscious, Sumrall was severely hypothermic, dehydrated, and had frostbite on his feet and arms. He was taken by helicopter to a hospital in El Paso, where his body core temperature was reported to be 81 °F (27 °C).^{[1][6]} As of the following Tuesday, December 8th, he remains in intensive care.^[7]

It appears that Sumrall broke into the nearby cabin where he ate some food and prepared to light a fire in a wood-burning stove. He was unable to find matches; these were in a can near the stove. He also was unable to find water. He then left the cabin, leaving his wallet and a small backpack inside. Leaving the shelter of the cabin is thought to have been fortunate because if he had remained in the cabin he might not have been found in time.^[6]

The cabin is located several miles up a ranch road from Royal John Mine Road,^[6] approximately 8 miles (13 km) southwest of Emory Pass as the crow flies. Google Maps gives the driving distance as 31 miles and taking 70 minutes.

Apparently frightened by Sumrall's rescuers, Zulu ran away. Volunteers continued to search for her, some with search and rescue dogs, and to set out water and dog food and scent articles from Zulu's home in hopes of attracting her. Concerned citizens posted rewards for her. Many people credit her for keeping Sumrall warm and thereby helping to save his life.^[8]

Career and personal life

Sumrall is director of business development for Glacier Technologies LLC, a 4-year-old company headquartered in El Paso that performs technology, engineering and call center services mostly for federal government agencies. In the 1960s, Sumrall was a captain in the United States Air Force.^[9]

Sumrall is married with a stepson and stepdaughter, and has two daughters and a son from a previous marriage.^{[5][9]} He moved to El Paso from Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1991. His wife of 20 years, Jan Sumrall, was the El Paso West Side city representative from 1995 to 2003.^[9]

He is a graduate of Louisiana State University. As well as hiking, his outdoor activities include hunting and wildlife conservation. He is a member of Ducks Unlimited.^[5]

See also

- Air ambulance
- Blizzard

- Medical evacuation

References

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External links

- New Mexico Search and Rescue Council: State SAR Resources
- Grant County Search and Rescue: News

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Categories: Search and rescue incidents | Living people

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