

Lost Hunter, Robert Willis, Dinkey Creek, CA, 11-22-08 and 11-23-08

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Fresno County Sheriff's Department sent out a request for mutual aid on 11-20-08 requesting assistance in their continuing efforts in their search for a missing hunter, Robert Willis, scheduled for the upcoming weekend. Mr. Willis started his hunting trip on 10-30-08 and had been reported missing when he did not return home 11-01-08 from his trip in the Western Sierra Nevada Mountains, in eastern Fresno County. San Bernardino Mountain Search & Rescue Team was able to deploy four members to the search.

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Our Team Commander, Pat Burns, team members Mark Biloki, Don Philpott, and myself, met at our Shack about 0100 hours on Saturday, 11-22-08, to load up and make the long drive up to Dinkey Creek - the area where the hunter's vehicle had been located. Dinkey Creek is not only the name of a good sized creek in the area, but an entire topo quadrangle. The name peaked my interest, so I researched a bit about the area's name. It seems that in 1863, a small hunting party had a run-in with a grizzly bear. Their little dog, named Dinkey, put up a fight, but was no match for the bear. In her (or his) honor, the hunters dubbed the area Dinkey Creek after their faithful companion.

Mr. Willis, 38 years of age, is considered an experienced hunter. Fresno County has been searching since he was reported missing, but bad weather - rain, snow, and falling temperatures - has hindered much of their efforts.

We arrived at the CP about 0600 Saturday morning, just in time for breakfast. We all know, and greatly appreciate how well our County feeds us in the field, but they have some pretty good competition from Fresno. We had a hearty breakfast of eggs, hash browns, sausage, hot coffee, etc., while adjusting to the cold weather and waiting for briefing. It was a nice hot breakfast but with frost and ice on the ground it didn't stay that way for long. Cpl. Thad Riley traveled up to the area the day before, and made sure that the cabin the Department rented for us for our weekend deployment was all in order. We are always happy to see Thad at the CP, either in county or out!

We were assigned to a team that included three Fresno County S&R members. All of the teams were being assigned to large areas close to where the subject's vehicle was located. It was thought that he had not gone far from the car, since that was his usual hunting style, and also because his day pack, sleeping bag, gear, and food were still inside. It appears he left with just his rifle and hand gun, and was dressed in camo-green.

The area being covered is a lush forest, thick with pine and fir, patches (large and small) of thick chaparral, steep hillsides, areas of sheer granite faces, piles of huge granite structures, lots of sign of bear and mountain lion, and lots and lots of loose footing due to the recent storms pummeling the trees, dropping their slippery pine needles everywhere. We sure had our work cut out for us!

We worked all day Saturday performing fine grid searches throughout our assignment with our team of seven, following the contours across the sloping landscape. It brought back fond memories of BSAR and our exercises in grid-searching for the playing cards - moving forward looking for whatever evidence we might expect to find, and remembering to stop and turn around to look even harder under brush and into animal dens. We kept as tight to our grids as possible while bushwhacking through the brush and climbing the rock piles. We returned to the CP just before dark, and were fed a great dinner of salad, tri-tip, green beans, rice and garlic bread. Hot coffee was, of course, a welcomed necessity, but the hot apple cider was also hit the spot. We de-briefed, had our GPS tracks downloaded, and headed off to the cabin.

We followed Cpl. Riley to the cabin, which was already warmed up and ready for us to crash in. After a refreshingly hot shower, and a little bit of wonderfully relaxing conversation, I hit the sack early. Tomorrow morning was going to arrive fast and cold. I'm pretty sure that all of us had a great night's sleep that night!

Sunday morning started the same as Saturday (without the long drive, of course), and breakfast was just as good! This time it included biscuits and gravy! We were assigned to a team including two Fresno S&R members, and went out to our area. We ran our grids again across the contours of the landscape, and covered another difficult area. Again, no signs of our subject, but plenty of signs of wildlife. Back at the CP we had pork chops and all the other goodies, de-briefed, and had our GPS tracks downloaded. Our Deputy from the day before visited with us and told us that on both of our days of searching, our GPS tracks "blacked out the area". It was good to know that we covered our areas so well.

The subject is still missing, and with winter being so very close at hand, there may not be time left to continue the search this season. Did he see a buck and took off after it and got disoriented when the clouds moved in on him? Did he meet up with a bear, possibly with cubs, and had a not-so-good encounter? Did he slip and fall suffering serious injury? How much did the large and very active wildlife play in making it so hard to locate any sign of him?

We arrived back in town about 0100 Monday morning. Knowing I had to get up by 0500 to go to work made the long drive seem even longer. But it was well worth the effort to be able to work with my great teammates, the Fresno folks, working in such beautiful country, and being at least a small part of helping out with this tremendous task.