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THE ORDEAL

Lost hiker became dehydrated

By Christine Steele

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Editor's note: This is part two of a two-part series on Ross Mason, the Houston man who became lost in the Gila Wilderness during a planned four-day solo hike and had to be rescued. Part one ran Sunday and can be found on our Web site, www.scsun-news.com.

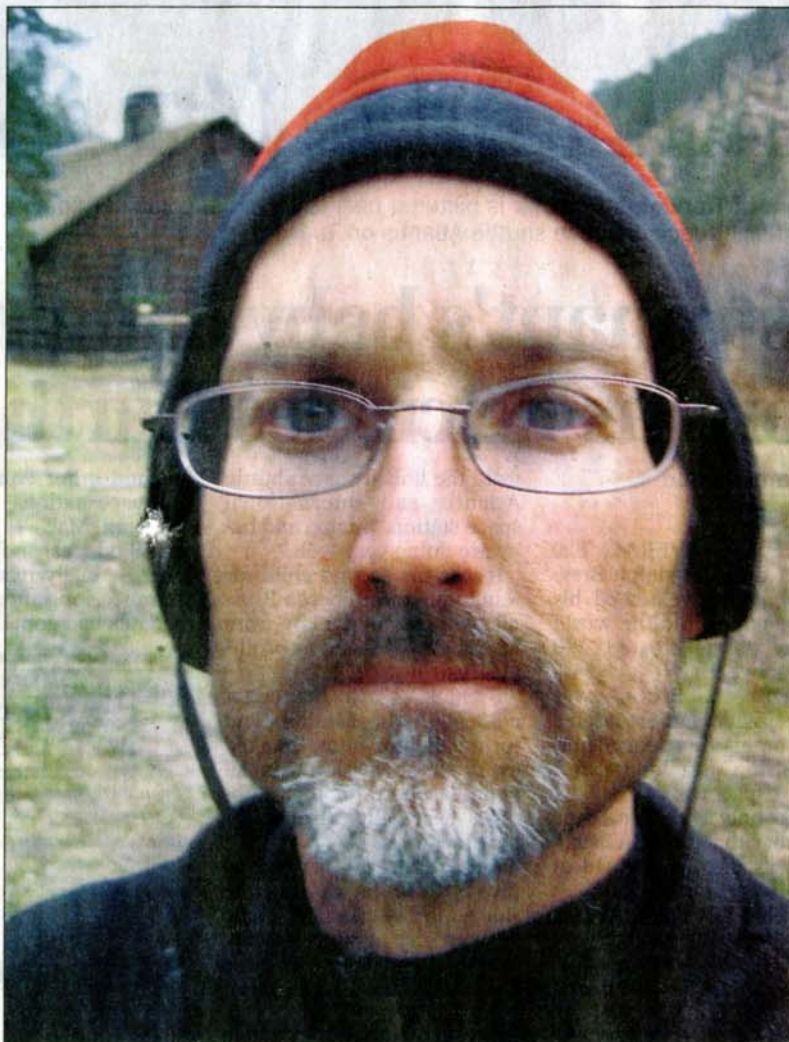
SILVER CITY — On Nov. 5, Ross Mason arrived at the Gila Cliff Dwellings Visitor Center for a planned solo hike in the wilderness. He had researched the trip and was planning a four-day hike that would take him on a 25-mile loop up the Middle Fork of the Gila River. He headed off on the morning of Nov. 6 and was expected back Nov. 10. He had a rental car to return in El Paso and flight back to Houston to catch. Instead, he was lost in the wilderness, 18 miles off course, getting dehydrated from the constant wind and exposure.

That afternoon, his rental car was discovered parked where he left it at TJ Corral. His friend Will Lidwell, back in Houston, knew something was wrong when folks from the Visitors Center contacted Lidwell and his partner, Jill Butler, who was Mason's emergency contact, to tell them Mason's car had been found and that he had missed his flight back to Houston.

Part two

Tuesday night, Ross Mason was staring up into the sky, watching commercial jet liners pass by overhead, far too high and too far away to see the signal fire he had built. About 20 miles away, 35 volunteers from four different search and rescue teams — Grant County Search and Rescue, White Mountain Search and Rescue in Ruidoso, Mesilla Valley Search and Rescue, and Organ Mountain Technical Rescue — along with state police, Border Patrol and the New Mexico National Guard, began searching for him in the rugged country around Big Bear Canyon.

The next morning, Mason woke up early and got the fire going by 6 a.m. He was determined to be visible if that plane went by again that day. He didn't know if the plane was searching for him or was on some kind of a schedule, but he wanted to be ready if it made its pass over him at 11 a.m. that day.



Courtesy photos

Ross Mason is shown here, dehydrated and exhausted, on the day before he was found by rescuers.

He hiked up to a landing and used downed branches to spell out the words: HELP, OK, the date, and his initials, RM. He used more branches to point an arrow to where he planned to hike. Staying on this little landing didn't seem to be getting him anywhere. It didn't matter what he did to help him be visible, there was no one to see him. And the wind was killing him. Literally. He was getting more and more dehydrated. The dry climate and the wind were sapping his body of moisture more rapidly than he could put it in. Boiling water was an effort. It took longer to boil at the higher elevations, and he vastly underestimated how much he would need. Water he boiled that he thought would last him a few days was gone in less than 24 hours. By midday Wednesday, he knew he had to get off the mountain and out of the wind. He could also see that the weather was starting to change. Clouds were coming in. The wind was picking up. He didn't know what that meant, not being fa-

miliar with the climate and territory here, but he knew it was getting colder, he was tired and dehydrated, and needed to get out of the elements.

He decided to go down to the valley and try to carry some water with him and head across the plateau again and try to retrace his steps out.

With downed branches again, he spelled out the words: NEED WATER, TRIED TO RETRACE PATH, 164-28, his initials, and the date, in case anyone had seen his signal fire. He lightened the load in his backpack so he could carry the extra water. He tossed out his plastic mallet and some stakes. He burned some extra socks and clothes. He thought, why carry all this equipment when what I really need is water. He headed back to White Creek Cabin and planned to rehydrate and hoped to carry enough water with him to get him across the plateau. On the way

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Mason

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down the mountain, between the landing and White Creek Cabin, his boot failed. That was the next thing that went wrong.

The combination of numerous river crossings with the drying wind and desert air took its toll on his trusty 10-year-old hiking boots. The sole peeled away from the leather at the seam and his foot was now sticking out the front of his boot. His options were becoming fewer and fewer.

He made it back to White Creek Cabin, deflated and exhausted. He set up his tent outside the cabin. He spelled out HELP with fence posts from a corral nearby. He didn't have enough energy to start a signal fire, much less break into the cabin. He was growing weaker and weaker.

Thursday morning he knew his options were limited. He didn't have a boot that would carry him across the plateau. He couldn't hike out down the canyon, either. All he could do was try to make himself visible to anyone who might be searching for him and try to maintain his situation. He still had several days worth of food left, and by this time, he was rationing it. A cold front was blowing in and he knew he was going to need a hot meal so he had been limiting himself to one serving of a food a day for the past several days.

At the cabin, he spelled out SOS on the ground in logs in front of the cabin. He laid his teal blue jacket on the ground below the O for better visibility. He hiked over to a junction of trails a couple of hundred yards from the cabin, where there was a "T" in the trail, and spelled out HELP with an arrow pointing left, and the date. If

anyone was hiking these trails, he was going to make sure they weren't going to miss him. That took most of Thursday. By that afternoon, he was in his tent, trying to get out of the weather, when he heard the helicopter.

He came out of his tent and grabbed the bright yellow dorysack that he kept his sleeping bag in, and started waving it at the chopper. He knew they saw him.

A rush of adrenaline came over him. He started gathering his things, the windsock from his sleeping bag, some clothing he had laid out. He collapsed his tent, began rolling up his sleeping bag. He had never broken camp so quickly. He counted six times that the chopper circled. He was jamming everything into his backpack, hurrying to get ready to be picked up, and before he finished, the chopper flew off. He thought that was a little unusual, but he sat down to wait. From 4:30 to 6 p.m. he sat with his things packed up and ready to go, but the chopper never returned. Exhausted, he set up camp again.

Weary and confused, he needed some comfort, so he decided to cook up two servings of food and have a feast. He knew the chopper crew saw him and he figured maybe because it was late in the afternoon, they would have to come back in the morning, or maybe fuel was an issue. Whatever the reason, he knew he was going to have to just wait it out.

The next morning, he woke feeling weak and dehydrated, and a little out of touch. He was still trying to figure out what had happened the day before, when he heard voices behind him. He was heading into his tent, and had turned in front of them to go back to his tent, but in his disoriented state, he hadn't seen anyone. Then he heard the horses.

He turned around and saw several men on horseback.



Courtesy photos

Mason's boots became damaged toward the end of hike, before he was found by rescuers.

"Which direction are you going?" he asked them, still a little confused.

"Are you Ross Mason?" the lead horseman asked.

Relief flooded over him. They knew his name. They knew his name! He couldn't believe it. He nearly laughed.

The men on horseback were three U.S. Forest Service personnel who had been participating in the search for Mason. They had been searching for days and traveling since sunrise to reach him. They were trailing a mule with provisions, and they had a key to the cabin.

They took the lead, telling Mason they were going to get him in the cabin, get a fire started, get him hydrated and open up some MREs and get some energy into him.

They checked his health and condition and radioed back to base, letting others know Mason was found and was unhurt.

Their voices sounded so sweet to Mason. He had heard nothing but the wind and his own heartbeat for days.

But they weren't out of the woods yet.

With the weather seemingly about to turn for the

worse and Mason in no condition to hike very far, the group decided to stay put for the night and see if there was going to be snow.

Shortly after the men on horseback arrived, five National Guardsman who had hiked through the night, stopping at 2 a.m. and then heading out again just after daybreak, made it to the cabin as well. The medic gave Mason a standard IV which his body drained in minutes, and then another one, larger, that went into his system at a slower rate.

One of the forest service personnel found some heavy duty tape and taped up Mason's bad boot.

He just let them take over, knowing they were professionals. He was just glad he was safe and was found.

Saturday morning, the group began their trek out of the wilderness.

A rider on horseback trailing another riding horse and an empty pack horse set out Saturday morning at daybreak to meet them, to help unload some of their gear and have Mason ride back on horseback.

By Monday morning, Mason was back at work in Houston. The experience, he says, still overwhelms him.

"Friday I was dehydrated

and desperate for water and had not had contact with people with several days. Saturday I rode 20 plus miles on horseback. Sunday I drove to El Paso and flew to Houston. Monday I was back at work and I had a full glass of water next to me at my computer."

Mostly he is amazed at — and grateful to — the legions of people, agencies and pack animals that came together to rescue him.

"I wouldn't be here without the help of so many people I will never meet. They don't know me and I haven't met them. It's very overwhelming, from the professionals to the volunteers, it's hard to believe so much effort was made by so many people. It's just incredible. I find that just overwhelming at times when I think about it."

Mason takes full responsibility for his predicament. He said it was a combination of things that led to his situation, from the wrong turn at the trail, to not consulting the map, to his filtration system failing to his boot blowing out. While he has enjoyed solo hikes in the past, he said he doesn't think he'll be going on one again, and doesn't advise others to, either.

"That one time it doesn't go as planned, you may end up in a bad situation, so why put yourself at risk if it can be avoided," he said.

A second person makes setting up and tearing down camp quicker, and can also help check with decision-making, he said. "Sometimes the time it takes to have a discussion is enough to reassess the situation to maybe make a different decision."

And he now knows that while a recommended route might say it takes four to five days, there are many variables that can make a trip longer.

"A hike shouldn't be driven by your flight schedule, that should not be the driver, do the hike, do it safely, and if it takes you two ex-

tra days, then it does," he said.

Hiking alone can also leave authorities with some questions, he said.

"It seems to me there are two types are people who like to go hiking alone in the wilderness, those who enjoy nature and the scenery, and the other smaller group, who go out there to disappear."

That was not his intent, Mason said, but his family had no way of proving that to authorities.

"There was no way for them to physically prove that I went out there for legitimate reasons," he said.

But more than anything, Mason just wanted to express his gratitude to all involved in helping in his rescue and safe return.

"I can't say enough how grateful I am for the effort that was put in to help me get back to my life. To give me my life and my world back to me, it is incredible the amount of support and concern people have expressed, that so many people would come together for someone they don't know."

Turning in his rental car at the counter in El Paso, Mason tried negotiating with the clerk on the several days of extra rental fees he would be assessed. "I was lost for a few days," he said, "I was wondering if you had any hardship waivers."

The clerk told him no, but if he called the toll-free number and explained his story, they may consider giving him a waiver.

"I understand," Mason said.

Just as he turned to go, the clerk asked, "By the way, where did you get lost?"

"The Gila Wilderness," Mason said.

"Oh, yeah," the clerk said, "I was lost there, too."

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