



AAC Publications

Fatal Scrambling Fall

Colorado, Sangre de Cristo Range, Ellingwood Point

On October 11, Alamosa Volunteer Search and Rescue (AVSAR) was contacted about a missing female climber, who was last heard from at 3 p.m. the previous day at the summit of Ellingwood Point (14,042 feet). The missing person was described as Joy Cipoletti, a 60-year-old female who had been scrambling the third-class north ridge of Ellingwood Point via South Zapata Creek. She was last seen by a fellow hiker above the C2 Couloir at 2 p.m. on October 10.

AVSAR started cell phone forensics with AFRCC (Air Force Rescue Coordination Center) and was able to ping Joy's cellphone at the summit of Ellingwood, where she had sent a text to her daughter about a successful summit the previous afternoon. She had also told her daughter that she was abandoning her original plan of traversing over to Blanca Peak because of her late summit time. Joy apparently then turned around and began her descent the way she came up.

On the evening of October 11, AVSAR sent out a team to begin searching the South Zapata Lake Basin for any sign of Joy. The incident commander initially requested the use of a REACH medical helicopter, but winds were too vigorous to allow the helicopter to insert team members. The REACH-29 crew was able to fly over the search area to look for any signs of light or fire source, before all aircraft were grounded due to extreme winds in the area.

On October 12, the AVSAR incident commander received a GPS ping from Joy's Garmin device. After receiving the coordinates, the plan was to send out two team members to begin searching the area of the ping location, which was in Huerfano County, on the opposite side of Ellingwood Point from the route Joy was supposed to take back. Two AVSAR team members were inserted by a REACH helicopter, and Huerfano County sent in people to search the Lily Lake Trail. REACH also inserted a fourth team member in the South Zapata Lake Basin, where the hasty team had stayed overnight and had been searching all morning for any sign of Joy.

After searching all day near the location of the Garmin ping, the area was cleared of any sign of Joy. After speaking with representatives of Garmin and looking at the location and time of the ping, it was determined that this was a false ping. It was not logistically possible to travel to the location of the ping in the time between Joy's last known location and the time of the ping.

On October 13, Alamosa County Dispatch received a call from a group of hunters who claimed they saw an older woman hiking up to the summit of California Peak. Their description matched Joy's physical description. Teams of searchers were inserted via Flight for Life (Lifeguard 4) near the summit of California Peak to begin searching that area.

On October 14, there was an extreme turbulence warning for the entire search area and beyond, so all air assets had to be grounded. Nonetheless, the search area was expanded. Even though Joy had told her daughter she was not going to traverse over to Blanca Peak after her Ellingwood Point summit, it can be easy for some to get turned around on the summit. AVSAR called in their specialty 4WD team to take searchers up Lake Como Road, from which searchers could examine the Blanca-Ellingwood traverse for any sign of Joy.

On day five of the operation (October 15) multiple assets were used in a big final push to find Joy. Two technical teams from AVSAR and Western Mountain Rescue Group were tasked with rappelling into and clearing couloirs below Ellingwood Point. This was no easy task, with over 1,000 feet of

rappels and very loose rock all around them. Multiple searchers were also inserted into the Pioneer Basin, with the thought that Joy could have descended into the wrong drainage. A drone team was inserted into the Zapata Basin to assist the technical team in clearing all the named and unnamed couloirs.

At around 1:30 p.m. on October 15, the crew of a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter from Buckley Air Force Base, guided by AVSAR technical team members, spotted Joy's orange backpack in one of the couloirs. A drone team deployed to the area from Douglas County Search and Rescue confirmed Joy's location. She apparently had fallen 500 to 800 vertical feet, and her body was extracted from the site.

Analysis

The cause of Joy's fall is unknown as she was climbing alone. The route which she both ascended and descended is Class III and highly exposed. Even for experienced scramblers, the worst-case scenario can always occur. (Source: Crystal Wilson, president, Alamosa Volunteer Search and Rescue.)

Images

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