



Andy Cripe/Gazette-Times
Marys Peak Search and Rescue members, from left, Tony Rumpca, Jerry Smith, Don Reid and Steven Loop take a bearing Sunday morning during a training exercise at E.E. Wilson Wildlife Refuge near Adair Village. Two teams worked together to triangulate the position of a beacon simulating the signal from a crash-landed airplane.

Help for the lost

By Nancy Raskauskas
Gazette-Times Reporter

Marys Peak Search and Rescue prepares for new recruits

On Sunday at the E.E. Wilson Wildlife Refuge north of Adair Village, the members of the Marys Peak Search and Rescue were out rabbit hunting.

Instead of guns, however, the group was equipped with remote antennas and two-way radios. The "rabbit" was search and rescue volunteer Cliff Nelson, who carried an Emergency Locator Transmitter out to the far reaches of the refuge on his mountain bike to hide it for a training exercise.

The ELT was the type that might be found in a small aircraft. The search and rescue volunteers were simulating the steps they might take to pin-point the exact location of a crashed plane.

The members were also honing their radio tracking skills in order to get their equipment tuned up for next session of search and rescue certification classes, which starts March 6.

"It's one of those things, if you don't use it, you lose it," said Marys Peak Search and Rescue President Aaron Simpson.

Out of the 100 hours of course work that the certification class covers, ELT training will be about six of those hours.

Other training sessions will cover wilderness navigation, tracking, rescue procedures, shelter building and survival skills.

The course culminates with an overnight exercise near Marys Peak, where participants must take part in a rescue simulation, then build their own camp to weather the night on their own.

On Sunday, the volunteers set up a base camp and sent out two teams of searchers with radio antennas to search for Nelson and the beacon.

The two teams took bearings from multiple locations to hone in on the location of the ELT.

The volunteers were reminded that radio antennas are not always an infallible tracking method, when one of the groups got a wrong reading because of signal interference from nearby Coffin Butte. Signal interference can be caused by large land forms, buildings, power lines and even fence lines. For this reason, this type of tracking does not always work well in extremely steep terrain or inside cities.

Also, sometimes a plane's beacon will not survive the crash, as was the case in a Sept. 12 crash near Alsea that killed Duane Jasper Miller, 24, of Billings, Mont., and Kyle Donovan Houghton, 20, of Lake Oswego.

But if all the variables line up, knowing how to track an ELT efficiently could make the difference for crash victims.

Volunteer Don Reid brought his own specially made antenna to the training exercise Sunday, which helped turn in a perfect bearing for the ELT.

Reid is a member of the Benton County Amateur Radio Emergency Service, another group that provides support during search and rescue missions and assists with training. His towering antenna and the neon vests and backpacks of his team made quite a sight on the quiet back road through the refuge.

"Yes, we get some funny looks," said Steven Loop.

"You usually have to spend a few minutes explaining," added Rumpca.

Loop and Rumpca have both been search and rescue volunteers for about 13 years. They found it was a good fit for them to use skills from their military backgrounds to help other people in a time of need. Loop was a soldier in the Army and Rumpca was a National Guardsman.

Back at base camp, fellow volunteer Dan Kearl mapped the progress of the two teams with computer software that allowed him to plot the teams' positions and vectors across the map and compare them to the actual location of the beacon.

When they got close, he had the rabbit move to give them extra practice.

Kearl, a longtime search and rescue volunteer who works as an engineer at Hewlett-Packard, relishes the opportunity to use his skills to help with search efforts. Still he can't help but get choked up when talking about the experience of helping families look for a missing — possibly dead — relative. It changes rescuers, he said.

"There is a certain amount of growth that has to take place," he said, and noted that part of new recruits' training includes information on how to deal with the stress of searching.

Kearl wears a pager just in case he's suddenly called out for a search and other volunteers have similar arrangements to leave their jobs or drop whatever they are doing to assist with searches.

Several of the volunteers still wear buttons on their vests with photos of Brooke Wilberger, a college student who was abducted outside a Corvallis apartment complex in 2004, showing their long-term commitment to finding her.

Marys Peak Search and Rescue also frequently assists other units in neighboring counties, such as assisting in the search for University of Oregon professor Daming Xu in Lane County in 2007. More routine calls have included searches for lost mountain bikers, hunters and children.

"We're rooting for them from the minute we get the call," said fellow volunteer Jerry Smith. "That's what we're here for — finding people."

AT A GLANCE

Mary's Peak Search and Rescue Inc. (MPSAR) is a nonprofit organization made up of volunteers. MPSAR provides assistance to the Benton County Sheriff's Office and other official agencies in charge of search and rescue missions throughout Oregon in the form of initial first response, search management, road search and containment, man tracking, communications and other ground search teams. MPSAR is funded by donations, dues and fundraising events.

MORE GROUPS

Marys Peak Search and Rescue (MPSAR)

Information: 541-766-6864, see www.mpsar.org or e-mail mpsar1@yahoo.com.

Corvallis Mountain Rescue Unit (CMRU)

Information: cmru.peak.org or 766-6057.

Benton County Posse

Information: bcposse.exchangenet.net or 766-6045.

Benton County Tracking Unit (BCTU)

Information: Call the Sheriff's Office, 766-6864.

Benton County Amateur Emergency Radio Service (BCARES)

Information: www.bcares.org.

NorthWest Search Dogs (NWSd)

Information: www.nwsdk9s.org.

Nancy Raskauskas can be reached at 758-9542 or nancy.raskauskas@lee.net.

Copyright © 2008 Corvallis Gazette Times, A Lee Enterprises subsidiary