

Teen Travel Group Rescued Near Todd Lake

by K_Guice

Eleven teenagers and their adult counselors from around the country are back on the road again after being rescued by Deschutes County Sheriff's Search and Rescue volunteers.

The group, ages 14 to 17, was with Longacre Expeditions, an adventure travel program for teenagers. They had rented mountain bikes in Bend around 9:30 a.m. on July 6 and were headed to a campout at Todd Lake. Later in the day, they encountered trouble, according to Sgt. Dan Swearingen with the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office.

The investigation revealed the group rode up Skyliners Road to the 4601 Road. At that point, they encountered snowdrifts on the bicycle trail and moved to the 370 Road, which was also snow covered and lost the route.

When the group realized they needed help they used their cell phone to notify the rest of the group at the lake, who in turn notified 911.

An Air Life helicopter, Mt. Bachelor sno-cat and volunteers searching on ATVs helped Deschutes County Sheriff's Search and Rescue. Together they looked along Forest Road 370 from the Todd Lake Junction and Road 4601 above the Skyliners-Bear Wallow Butte area, Sgt. Swearingen said.

In addition, two citizens aided in the search efforts with their snowmobiles to transport a SAR volunteer into the area.

At approximately midnight, four hours after the search began; Air Life spotted the group near Happy Valley, according to Sgt. Swearingen. Searchers were directed to their location. A sno-cat provided by Mt. Bachelor was used to bring out blankets, sleeping bags and tents.

One group member who was experiencing severe cold related symptoms was brought back. The remainder of the group remained with the Search and Rescue (SAR) volunteers, who built a fire and dried their clothing, deeming it safer to warm the group overnight and bring them out in the morning.

The following morning, a U.S. Forest Service Trail Crew, along with SAR volunteers, transported the group out on ATVs.

While the group was smart to use their cell phones and had the basic gear required for the trip including an altimeter, contour map and compass; Sgt. Swearingen said they were not prepared for the winter like conditions.

Roger Smith, the owner and director for Longacre Expeditions says they are learning from what happened.

In business since 1981, Smith said their groups have been using the trail for years and never encountered that amount of snow.

“The group was on a fairly well defined path and got more snow than anticipated,” he said. “There were two errors that were made: they didn’t have their cold weather gear and the second is that they didn’t have a GPS (global positioning system).”

While Smith says there are no excuses, earlier in the day the teens had met up with the van to have lunch and thought the conditions were fine to continue as they were. “It was sunny and warm and they only had five miles to go, so they thought they were home free.”

He says his business will continue to examine what happened and make improvements as needed. For now, he is just happy that everyone is safe.

“I am pleased our kids were found in time, so there were no debilitating injuries; no one was hospitalized and no volunteers were hurt,” he said.

Smith says he plans on writing a personal thank you note to everyone that helped in the search and rescue efforts. “I am extremely grateful for all of the folks who, at the very least, gave up a night’s sleep and put themselves at risk to help out kids,” he said.

As for the group, they are back out and enjoying what is left of their 24-day traveling adventure.

Todd Lake Area

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