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CENTERPIECE

Haywood County Search and Rescue saves 10 hikers

By Aarik Long along@themountaineer.com 5 hrs ago 0

SAVED THE DAY — A group of four adults and six children were saved from the Shining Rock Wilderness Area near Graveyard Fields over the past weekend. Shining Rock Search and Rescue

Shining Rock Search and Rescue

The Haywood County Search and Rescue team saved a group of hikers last weekend that got lost the Shining Rock Wilderness Area.

Rescuers extricated a group of 10 from the woods — including six children and four adults — between during the overnight hours between April 1 and 2.

"They went up there and went hiking, and they got disoriented and turned around" Haywood County Search and Rescue Lieutenant Cody Parton said.

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The lost hikers didn't make it out of the woods until after 2 a.m., but were thankful to their rescuers.

"They were grateful to not be spending the night in the forest," Parton said. "They were very appreciative and ready to be out of the woods and headed home in their warm vehicles."

Despite being lost in the woods most of the night with kids, the group escaped any harm.

"There were no real injuries for the folks who got lost," Parton said. "I think there was some mild hypothermia because the wind was blowing so hard and it was cold up there. And one of them had a twisted ankle."

The group luckily had been able to find a spot with cell service after they realized they were lost.

"They ended up getting access to call 911," Parton said.

The Cruso Fire Department was the first to respond. Parton said they initially spoke to the hikers on the phone to try to talk them out of the forest.

"It's a pretty common thing," Parton said. "Sometimes we are able to get folks pointed in the right direction if they just get turned around."

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During the call, the fire department was able to figure out where the group was. They told them to stay put and then sent a small crew in to get them. But they didn't stay put.

"They had actually kept moving," Parton said. "They didn't stay still like we asked them to. They kept going and got themselves further in than we originally thought."

With how big the group was and how deep they had gotten, the Cruso Fire Department called on the Haywood Search and Rescue Team for help.

Around midnight, the team made its way up to the Shining Rock Wilderness Area to meet up with Cruso Fire Department. With the cooperative effort, the teams were able to pull the group of hikers out.

That wind presented issues not only for the lost hikers, but also the rescuers.

"That wind event was a troubling thing," Parton said. "We had all the weather that day. We had that high amount of wind and, of course, it's even more exaggerated up there on the Parkway at those elevations. The wind was definitely a lot more severe."

The group had started hiking from Graveyard Fields off the Parkway early that morning, before becoming lost in the afternoon. All in all, it was about 11 hours that the hikers had been trying to get out of the forest. It was nearly 5 a.m. before the mission was fully over.

The search and rescue team is a volunteer organization, so all of the rescuers were coming from home to head towards the scene of the missing hikers.

"While it is quick, it isn't an instantaneous thing," Parton said. "If you dial 911 and ask for a firetruck or ambulance, you would hopefully have one of those within five or 10 minutes. The search and rescue team is a little bit different — different equipment set and specialized skills. It takes a little bit longer to get up there."

Parton said the team usually carries out 20 to 40 of these rescue missions per year and that he hopes hikers remember to go in to the forest prepared.

"The challenges are folks go hiking and not being prepared, not being familiar with the area and not having the appropriate equipment. They didn't have flashlights. They didn't have the appropriate clothing. They didn't check the weather," he said.

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