



The Blanca Massif, as seen from the Huerfano River Valley floor near the Lily Lake trailhead Sept. 27, 2021. (Mike Sweeney/Special to The Colorado Sun)

When people die in the outdoors, sometimes friends are the ones to find them

A week after Vaughn Fetzer was reported missing on Blanca Peak, the fourth highest mountain in Colorado, friends found his body in an unstable area. Rescuers spent several days in freezing temperatures searching near vertical cliffs and scree fields but suspended the mission after a search team member was injured by falling rock in a steep couloir below the 14,344-foot summit.

The discovery of the 57-year-old Durango nurse marked the third time in less than a year that friends stepped in to assist search and rescue teams in finding a lost loved one. (Rescuers recovered Fetzer’s body the next day.)

When backcountry skiers Dr. Jeff Paffendorf and Albert Perry did not return from their ski trip to an area called Battleship near Ophir Pass on Dec. 19, 2020, friends rallied. They skied into the area in the dark, after a search helicopter had spotted a large avalanche with ski tracks heading into it. Around 11 p.m. the friends located the bodies of the two beloved Durango skiers from a large avalanche debris field. Rescuers the next day retrieved the mens’ bodies.

By Jason Blevins
The Colorado Sun

On June 17, expert kayaker and mountain guide Chason Russell separated from his kayak in the middle of the daunting Meatgrinder rapid on the Crystal River near Redstone. As his longtime paddling partner Stan Prichard attempted to haul his friend to shore, Russell disappeared into a churning hole.

Searchers spent most of Thursday evening and Friday morning scouring the river downstream but could find no sign of Russell. Meanwhile, an army of Russell’s friends gathered from all over Colorado and the West. They were all experts — professional kayakers, climbers and skiers with years of experience in the mountains — and they launched their own highly technical recovery.

“I have to say this right off. This is a bit of a slippery slope. People are always going to want to chase down their friends ... the first speech we gave that morning with Chase in the river was that he is not really there. We are just getting his body,” said Josh Borof, an accomplished



Almost 30 friends of Chason Russell organized a complicated recovery in the middle of Meatgrinder rapid in the Crystal River. The expert paddlers, climbers and mountaineers recovered their friend’s body on June 18, the day after the experienced kayaker and mountaineer disappeared in the Class V rapid. (Courtesy photo)

mountaineer and paddler from Telluride who helped orchestrate the recovery of his friend with a singular focus on safety for the ad hoc recovery team. “That was our top, top, top priority. No one even falls in the water.”

Six weeks earlier, Borof and his 17-year-old son had scouted Meatgrinder. As they walked back to their kayaks above the rapid, Borof decided to walk around the rapid and positioned himself with safety ropes below the rapid for his son, who flipped but rolled in the exact same spot Russell disappeared.

“There are sieves all over in there. It’s a pretty scary rapid,” he said.

Russell was one of the most skilled kayakers in the state. He’d spent decades exploring some of the West’s most difficult stretches of whitewater. The 41-year-old expert skier, climber and paddler guided people into the mountains, shared his skills with younger athletes and volunteered with Mountain Rescue Aspen. And along the way, he gathered an array of impressively skilled friends.

His colleagues on the rescue team on Thursday had deployed drones to study sections of rapid but could not find any sign of the missing paddler. More than two dozen of Russell’s friends

were gathered on the banks of the Crystal River the Friday after he disappeared. Prichard was sure he knew where his friend’s body was in the river. Two intrepid paddlers had recovered his PFD and other gear from a hole downstream, where aerated, foaming water had prevented search-team drones from seeing the equipment.

“We all know Stan and his ability is unrivaled,” Borof said. “I’ve never met anyone with more technical proficiency in so many different realms. So when a dude like Stan says ‘That’s where he is.’ We listened. We said ‘We are with you. Let’s do this.’”

The team of friends solemnly rigged a complex system of ropes across the river. They grabbed Russell’s 12-foot raft and ferried it on the ropes to the middle of the river. First they tried it empty. Then they loaded it with rocks. Then they tried it with three people. Kayakers waited downstream in their boats. Paddlers on shore stood ready with throw bags to rescue anyone who might have tumbled from the raft into the Class V rapids.

It is uncommon for Colorado search and rescue teams to give their blessing to civilians to conduct their own search and rescue missions. (Except, of course, when teams need large numbers of people to scour non-technical terrain.) The Pitkin County Sheriff’s Office, which oversees Mountain Rescue Aspen, gave Russell’s friends access to the Redstone fire house as a staging area.

“They said we understand and you need to be careful,” Borof said. “We were so glad they were not being adversarial in that situation.”

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