



Sometimes that mountain keeps a secret, never letting us know what happened. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

Sometimes the Mountain Keeps a Secret

Raymond Jones and his best friend, Ralph Pehrson, were not just best friends and neighbors, they were hunting buddies. Anyone who hunts or fishes knows the close bond people have when they share their outdoor passion.

As hunting season approached, the two hunting buddies practiced with their bows almost every evening, after work. They enjoyed the preseason anticipation and took their sport seriously enough that they understood practice and preparation. I understand. I feel it myself before every hunt, the anticipation, planning, and just plain excitement for the trip. They did not know the hunt would not follow the plan.

September 7, 1968 was Jones' 39th birthday, and what better way to spend it than being up in the Hayden Creek area of Lehmi County, Idaho, with his hunting buddy. Pehrson was working a ridge, with Jones farther uphill from him. They were looking for mountain goats. Jones signaled to Pehrson that he was going further up the mountain, and over the top. Perhaps he saw something which enticed him to climb further up the slope.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

As night approached, Pehrson headed back to their camp and waited for Jones to return. He never did. A search was organized by the Lehmi County Sheriff, which involved a couple hundred ground personnel and multiple aircraft. The search was called off because of a severe snowstorm, but 70 people and one helicopter remained in the mountains, looking for Jones.

Footprints were found along a ridge, in an area not previously search, and the operation was re-opened. The Sheriff called in more ground searchers and tracking dogs, but no further clues were ever found. It appears this was one secret the mountain was going to keep, at least for a while.

Ralph Pehrson was so distraught over losing his hunting buddy, he placed

his bow on the top shelf of his closet and never touched it again. He could not bring himself to use it again. Ralph Pehrson died in 2010, without ever finding out what happened to his buddy.

An unidentified bowhunter, who was also hunting mountain goats in the same area on September 17, 2021. He was looking for a shortcut from the area he was in, to another hunting area when he discovered human remains. Recovery efforts began the next morning.

The recovery team found a wallet with an identification card during the search, confirming it belonged to Raymond Jones. He was finally brought home, 53 years later.

Cause of death remains a mystery, a secret the mountain is going to keep. Speculation and local gossip included he slipped on some rocks and fell down a cliff or was attacked by a wild animal. One rumor suggested he left his friends and family in Salmon, Idaho, to start a new life in Arizona, after a lone report of him being sighted there. We will never know what went wrong.

This scenario plays out every year. Someone goes missing and is never seen again. Somewhere

around 600,000 people go missing in the United States every year. Most of these people go missing in populated areas and in major cities. These folks are usually easier to find. About 92 percent of all missing persons are recovered every year, either alive or deceased.

The hitch comes when people go missing in the great outdoors. Imagine looking for a lost back-packer in a 600,000-acre National Forest with not much more than a starting place. Often the trail is cold, tracks have been trampled on by other people, and search and rescue people are looking for the proverbial "needle in a very large haystack."

Our own search and rescue team, the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse has a few of these "cold case" files of missing people. We have also had cases here where someone was missing, and the remains were found years later. Usually, the mystery remains about what happened and what went wrong.

I have a friend who owns and operates a fishing camp in Northwestern Ontario. The camp is located on an island in the Upper Manitou Lake flowage. My friend's father came up for a week of fishing, looking for trophy

lake trout and northern pike. Since his father was a seasoned angler and knew his way around, he was given a boat and turned loose on the lake.

It was 4:30 in the afternoon when someone saw the boat a quarter mile off the island, idling in a circle, and nobody on board. Rescuers and divers from the Ontario Provincial Police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police searched the lake and surrounding areas for over 30 days and never found the body. Sometimes the lake keeps a secret too.

The nearest estimate cites around 1600 people are currently missing in the wild somewhere in the United States. The true data for the numbers of "cold case" missing persons is buried in the red tape bureaucracy of the National Park Service. My guess is they don't want that information out because it could be negative PR.

Most people who go missing in the wild, disappear in the late afternoon or during a severe weather episode. When bodies are recovered, it is usually in an area that has been previously searched, usually because of the density and ruggedness of the terrain. The majority of people are found fairly

close to where they went missing, but children are often found unbelievable distances from where they went missing.

We all enjoy our outdoor recreation. I especially look for very remote hunting and fishing trips. When you are very remote, you must also realize that help, should you ever need it, is a long way off, if it is there at all.

When planning for the big day in the woods, you probably only give a quick thought to what may go wrong, never really considering that the day in the woods might turn out to be *the day*. And if it is *the day* that you head to the last horizon, remember, the mountain does not like to give up a secret.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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