

Out in the cold too long

Two Clarkston residents rescued after being stranded more than a week in the Blue Mountains



Tribune/Barry Kough

Sarah Warden, of Clarkston, recounts her ordeal of being stranded during a recent blizzard south of Pomeroy.

By KERRI SANDAINE of the Tribune

After being stranded in a blizzard in the Blue Mountains for more than a week, Sarah Warden came close to giving up hope of getting out alive.

"It was a nightmare," said the 26-year-old Clarkston woman. "The snow kept building up, and the wind was howling. It was terrifying."

Warden and Clarkston resident Jonathan Moore, 25, went for a drive and got stuck in the snow in the Willow Springs area, located about 25 miles south of Pomeroy. They survived on animal crackers, two vitamin waters, dry dog food, garbage remnants and snow, before being rescued by logger Jackson Russell of Lewiston Monday morning.

"Thank God for loggers," Warden said Tuesday. "They are my angels, that's for sure. When I saw him, I told him I would become a logger and work for him the rest of my life."

Stories vary on when Moore and Warden became stranded in the woods. Her recollection is they left town last Saturday, but Moore said it could have been last Sunday or Monday.

Warden and Moore had not been reported missing. Garfield County officials received several broken 911 calls, but they could not pinpoint where the calls were coming from and harsh weather conditions ended a search of the area last Wednesday.

"I only planned on being gone for an hour or two," Moore said. "I just wanted to go for a drive and we got caught in a blizzard. My truck is still up there stuck in 6 feet of snow. It was a crazy experience, and we got a second chance at life. Thank God."

The pair had met through a friend, Warden said. She asked him for a ride to Lewiston, and the drive was a spur-of-the-moment idea. The petite woman was wearing jeans, tennis shoes and a lightweight jacket.

After the two-wheel drive pickup truck became stuck in the snow, Warden said she and Moore broke branches off a tree and built a fire. They hunkered down for the night and tried to shovel the truck out the next morning.

Moore had one bar of service on his cellphone and tried to call 911, but the call was disconnected.

"The snow started getting thick." Warden said. "I'm short and it was up to my hips. My clothes were soaking wet."

They huddled next to his dog, Bella (a Labrador/chow mix) for warmth inside the cab of the pickup. They brought garbage sacks from the back of the truck to use for cover, she said. When the animal crackers were gone, they rummaged through the trash, looking for scraps to eat, she said.

"It was freezing. We could hardly see anything. There was frost on the inside and outside of the windows. I tried my hardest to keep warm, but I didn't have proper attire for the conditions."

They wrapped insulation from beneath the floorboards around their feet, and Moore attempted to call 911 again on the second or third day, she said.

"I saw a blue plane fly over, and I heard the whine of snowmobiles, but I never saw them," Warden said.

When the weather finally cleared, they started hiking. She wrapped a shirt around her head, plastic bags around her feet and the pair kept pushing through the deep snow.

"My ex is a logger and, luckily, I paid attention," Warden said. "I was able to guide us out by the marks on the trees. I looked for bird feeds and any marks of civilization."

Warden doesn't know exactly how far they hiked, but she thinks it was between 2 and 5 miles. Eventually, they found a utility trailer belonging to Mark Swanson Logging of Clarkston, built a fire inside and spent the night.

"There was no food in there, but it was nice because it was enclosed."

On Monday morning, a snowmobile went right by the trailer, but the operator didn't see them, Warden said.

"My heart just sank. I started crying, 'I can't do this anymore.' That's when I started feeling hopeless."

About 45 minutes later, Russell came around the corner driving a piece of logging equipment, and Warden knew the nightmare was about to end.

"I owe Jackson and the logging company my life. I really do," said the single mother of three, breaking into sobs.

Russell, 43, has been a logger for 20 years. He plowed the area on Sunday the 15th and thinks the pair probably got stuck on Jan. 16.

"They were scared," Russell said. "When I came up over the snowdrift, I saw (Moore) standing there. He took off running at me, jumped up and threw his arms around me. He said they had been lost for days. I'm just happy I happened to be there. This could have been a lot of worse."

Warden and Moore were transported to the Iron Springs area to meet the Garfield County ambulance, which took them to St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Lewiston. Both were treated and released that afternoon.

"Search and rescue didn't know where we were at, and my 911 calls only lasted 30 seconds or so," Moore said. "Jackson Russell is a hero. If it wasn't for him, we'd probably be frozen to death."

The exact timeline of events remains unclear. Garfield County Sheriff Ben Keller issued a news release saying the pair traveled to the mountains on Jan. 15, based on snowplow reports.

Keller said Garfield County received three 911 calls on Jan. 17, but no latitude or longitude coordinates were provided. The caller said he got stuck in the woods after leaving the Heights and seeing a sign that said 18 miles to Pomeroy.

The cellphone Moore was using was not activated and could only be used to call 911, the sheriff said.

"By the time they called, we were looking for tracks that had been covered with snow."

Search and rescue volunteers were out last Tuesday night and all day last Wednesday, Keller said. The search was called off because of deteriorating weather conditions, and no one had been reported missing all week, he said.

"The weather was the biggest thing," Keller said. "The only way to get in there was snowmobiles and it was too deep. You can only do so much with a needle-in-a-haystack search. Our search guys did everything they could possibly do with the information they had. We figured they got out. We searched every single road in that area."

Shelly Warden of Clarkston said she was worried about her daughter, but assumed she had gone to the St. Maries or Coeur d'Alene area. "I didn't even know she was missing. The cops called and said, 'We have your daughter here, and she's got quite the story to tell.' I was just overwhelmed and broke down and cried."

Moore's mother also was unaware her son was missing.

"I just thought he was on another adventure," said Sandra Ross of Clarkston. "He has disappeared before. I had no clue. I gave him a long hug when I saw him. He looks a little thinner and his voice is raspy. He is at his girlfriend's now."

Warden's feet are swollen and she still feels weak, but she has been eating lots of food and is looking forward to being reunited with her children, ages 10, 7 and 1. The kids are staying with their fathers.

"I can't wait to see them and hold them," she said. "I'm truly grateful to be alive."

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