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Climber found, 2 missing

Search continues east of Granite Falls

By Scott Morris
Herald Writer

GRANITE FALLS - Searchers climbed to the top of Vesper Peak Wednesday, but could not find two men missing since thunderstorms rolled in Tuesday.

Rain soaked the 6,044-foot mountain 25 miles east of Granite Falls throughout the search, which began late Tuesday night and continued all day Wednesday.

Rescuers found a third companion, a German woman in her early 20s, about 4,600 feet up the mountain at 8:51 a.m. Wednesday. She had stopped short of the push to the summit Tuesday and was waiting for the men, said deputy Rich Niebusch, spokesman for the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office.

When the men didn't return, she hunkered down for the night. None of the three had tents or sleeping bags, although they did have rain gear, food and water, Niebusch said. Police did not release their names.

The woman was cold and wet, but not hypothermic, he said.

Vesper Peak is not considered difficult for experienced climbers, but it's not easy, either, said Scott Harder, owner of Quest Alb Mountaineering in Everett.

"If it's wet, that's one place you don't want to be," he said. "There's not any climbing holds, so if it's rainy, it's going to be very slippery."

A route on a nearby glacier is icy and has crevasses that pose a risk as well, Harder said.

Tuesday started clear and sunny, then turned nasty in the afternoon as high winds, rain and lightning moved in. Deputies using thermal imaging glasses spotted two fires in the area they suspected were started by lightning, Niebusch said.

Despite the foul weather, the sheriff's office briefly sent up a helicopter to assist the search, to no avail.

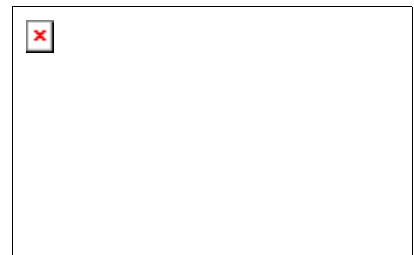
Search teams continued to scour the mountain into the evening on Wednesday. The summit team planned to head down toward other search teams working up from Spada Lake on the south side.

The two men, both 28, were experienced climbers who had a rope, crampons and helmets, Niebusch said.

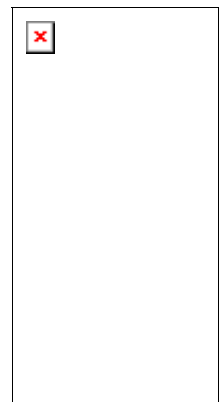
One, a Seattle man, had 10 years of climbing experience, including getting lost near Leavenworth and walking out on his own. The other is a U.S. citizen who lives in Germany and was visiting.

The three left Seattle at 5 a.m. Tuesday, leaving a note with friends telling them they should alert authorities if they did not return by 10 p.m. The Seattle man's girlfriend reported them missing at 10:45 p.m., Niebusch said.

The search was expected to resume at first light today if the men did not turn up.



Michael V. Martina / The Herald
Search-and-rescue volunteer Sky Terry of Everett walks through a base camp set up Wednesday near Vesper Peak east of Granite Falls.



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