

Episode 26: John was lost for 4 days

When you hear the word “lost”, what comes to your mind?

Honestly, it seems like these days I don't really worry too much about getting lost. Most of that is because of the amazing technology called GPS. I mean, I'm here in my office in Safety Harbor Florida, in the Tampa Bay area. I could get in my car, look at my phone, and enter some random house address in Los Angeles, California, 2500 miles away, and within seconds Google will be ready to direct me turn-by-turn to get to that address even though it will take me 37 hours to make that drive.

But that's only because I have a phone that can stay fully charged for the whole trip. And I have a car to keep the air at a cool temperature, and I'll have places to stop and get food along the way, not to mention snacks while I'm driving. And I'll have my bottle of water right there in the console for whenever I get thirsty. And when I get tired of driving all day, I'll have a hotel to spend the night and get the sleep I'll need to keep going the next day.

Well, today we're talking to John. John had none of those things. He was on foot, his phone was dead, he had no water, and he had no food. Even though the weather included rain and snow, he was only wearing a sweatshirt and shorts. He was alone. And the only place he could sleep at night was on the ground.

John was in a remote area of southern Utah, in a place called the Bryce Canyon National Park. This is a huge place, mainly full of rocks and trees and thorny bushes. It's 56 square miles, or 145 square kilometers.

And that's where John was lost. His plan was to spend a few **hours** there. He was still there after a few **days** – exhausted, dehydrated, dejected, hallucinating - and he still had no idea how to get out.

How did he get in this situation? What did he do each day? What did he end up drinking, out of desperation? And how did he finally get rescued? You're about to find out. And partway through John's story, we'll hear from Cody Sherriffs, one of the Garfield County Search and Rescue workers who ended up finding John and getting him to safety.

On this podcast, you hear stories from people first hand – true stories you just can't get on other podcasts. If you like this show and would like to support it, you can do that by going to [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support) and signing up to be a patron. This show takes a lot of time to put together, and it's all done by me, so your support really means a lot. And I thank you.

And now, here's my conversation with John.

Scott

How would you describe your hiking experience?

John

It's something that I've always enjoyed and loved, but it's not something that I'm able to get out and do much a few times a year, but it's, kind of, something I've been increasingly interested in and wanting to do more of.

Scott

Have you hiked in this park before?

John

I've never been to this park before. Honestly, I didn't even hear about it until 2 days before I went there.

Scott

Oh, wow. The park is Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah. How far do you live from that?

John

I live in the Magic Valley in Idaho, so I'm over 350 miles away.

Scott

Okay. So, how did you end up at Bryce Canyon in Utah on a Monday afternoon?

John

Well, here's a little backstory of how I ended up there - as cheesy as it may sound, I was, kind of, on a spiritual journey of sorts. I quit the job that I had been at for over 7 years and I had been traveling. I met up with a friend in Utah who told me about Bryce Canyon. I was thinking about heading down towards the Grand Canyon, so she said, "On your way, you might as well head to Bryce Canyon." So, that was pretty much what happened. I decided to head on down there and see what it was like.

Scott

So, it's kind of a spur of the moment but, sort of, planned as well on your way to a larger destination.

John

Yeah. I just, kind of, wandered aimlessly with, sort of, a broad goal - nothing specific in mind - but I knew that, eventually, I want to hit as many interesting places as possible.

Scott

Yeah, sounds like a good plan up until a certain point, I guess. So, you got to the Bryce Canyon National Park on a Monday. From when we record this, it only happened like a month ago.

John

It's been just a month, yeah.

Scott

So, you got to the park at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and the plan was to do what? How long were you planning to be out?

John

When I got there, I almost turned around because there was an entrance fee and I didn't really know what this place was like. So, I got up to the gate, turned around, had a second thought, and was like, "Okay, well, let's just do this. I made it all the way here. I should just go." So, the hesitation is, kind of, weird. Once I got there, I only intended on being there for a few hours - maybe, go hiking for about 4 hours total back and forth.

Scott

Where you went in from isn't just, like, a big huge wilderness - there is actually a hiking path, right?

John

Yes. From where I started hiking, there is an actual path and a clear trail, but that trail, kind of, gets covered up after so far. Apparently, they are not able to maintain all of the deeper trails because it is just so big, and they don't have the manpower to do it.

Scott

All right. It's a huge area. Do you know how big this park is?

John

I think I read it's around a 50-miles radius.

Scott

That's a lot of space to get lost in.

John

Yeah.

Scott

When you started out, what were you wearing?

John

All I had on me was a sweatshirt and shorts, so I wasn't really prepared to be out there for too long.

Scott

Right. You weren't planning to be out for too long either.

John

Definitely wasn't.

Scott

Did you bring anything with you like supplies or water or anything?

John

I had a Camelbak, snacks, blankets, a tent, a sleeping bag, and everything in the trunk of my car. I was very prepared up until I actually left the car.

Scott

That's pretty ironic. You had all that stuff because you were already, sort of, on a trip anyway - you were camping out in other places along the way.

John

I was planning on it. Yeah, definitely.

Scott

Did you have a phone?

John

Yeah, I had my phone. Actually, once I started down the trail the first time, I got about 10 minutes in. Then, I realized that there was kind of a hurry. There is a challenge that they had - there's a sign that said, "There are these monuments to look for on the trail. So, with your map, you're supposed to take a picture and then, kind of, mark off the monuments that you're able to find" We'll come to the map in a moment. I actually went back to the car for about a half-hour to charge my phone - it was, at least, about 70% when I charged it.

Scott

Could you get a phone signal while you were out there?

John

To a certain point - maybe, let's say about an hour down - and then nothing. Once you get a little ways away, you have no service at all.

Scott

Because they don't put phone towers out in the middle of nowhere. So, you started out at 3 o'clock. Just take us through that day. Like, when did you know you were lost and what did you do after that?

John

When I got there, I saw that they had an approximate time for sundown - I kept that in my mind. So, I was like, "Well, I have about 2-3 hours to walk down and then, maybe, 2-3 hours to walk back. Once I got going, I just kind of lost track of time because I was really feeling great and enjoying the walk - it was beautiful down there. The next thing I know, honestly, was it was starting to get dark. Then, I was like, "It's about time to turn back." I had a flashlight on my phone, so I figured it'll last long enough. If I lose my way, it would, at least, help me find my way in the dark - it shouldn't be a big deal - and just follow the trail. Once it got dark, I kind of realized that, maybe, I wasn't where I remember - I ended up using my flashlight and realized that I had no idea where I was. I couldn't find my original trail and I ended up stepping in some water. It was so dark that I was, kind of, walking around, trying to figure out and find a place where I can just hang out for the night. I figured that it'll be fine in the morning. It's not my first time hanging out somewhere without a tent - no big deal. I, kind of, got annoyed when I stepped into some streaming water - you can hear it moving - and didn't really have a choice but to sleep in wet socks and shoes that night.

Scott

It's hard enough when you're lost during the day, but now with it being dark though... When it got dark and you realize that you don't know where you were going, you kind of resigned yourself, "Okay, I'm going to spend a night here."

John

Yeah. At that point, I wasn't really too worried about it - I figured that I'll just make the best of it and it'll be, kind of, a fun little story, "I got lost overnight and I made my way back. No big deal."

Scott

How cold was it?

John

It really wasn't too bad on that first night. I don't really know the exact temperature, but I would say that it probably got down to somewhere around 40-45°F, so it was a little chilly. But I live in Idaho, so we're used to the cold, so it wasn't too bad. I was able to find a small alcove on the other side of that water to crawl in, block myself, and help keep myself warm.

Scott

So you had a little bit of shelter...

John

A little bit, yeah.

Scott

Were you concerned about wild animals?

John

A little bit, at first, just because I saw a sign about bears - they said something like "Just leave the bears alone" which is good advice, of course. But since I didn't really hear anything the first night, it really wasn't on my mind too much.

Scott

So, you got bedded-in for the night there. Did you actually sleep that night?

John

Eventually, I got a little bit of sleep. The wind, kind of, picked up in the middle of the night and that didn't really help - I, kind of, ended up getting a little chillier. Because I was in an unfamiliar place, I was definitely a little worried, so I didn't sleep great. But, eventually, I got a few hours.

Scott

Okay. So, day 2 - Tuesday...

John

I decided, "This is it. I'm gonna go ahead and check out the map that I had." When you get in there, they actually give you a map. So, I was looking at my map and thinking, "Well, this is where I started. Since the water is over here, this has to be generally where I'm at." So, I started to follow what I thought was the correct direction. I made my way through these bushes that have thorns and it's very annoying to get bushwhacked. Eventually, I got to what looked like it should be the trail, but there was a tree that fell over and blocked that trail. So, I tried to go over or around, and that just keeps happening over and over again. So, eventually, at some point during the day, I decided to climb and see if I can see anything - my car or the street. So, I climbed up as high as I could and everything looked the same. I mean, there are slightly different colored rocks, but I couldn't see anything different at all. When I climbed down, I'm pretty sure that I just climbed down on the other side. So that, kind of, started me getting more lost than I already was, if that makes sense.

Scott

That's one of the things I was going to ask you - what was the terrain like? Is it all rocky or forest? What was that like?

John

It was definitely a mixture. Where I was at is mostly forest. There are a lot of bushes, tall grasses, and trees. There are definitely parts of it where it's just rock. There are a lot of weeds. I didn't realize that once I got to the top, I was looking around and I got turned around. So, when I got down to the other side, even though it all, kind of, looks the same, there are certain landmarks, trees, and things like that, that you can pick out, but it still looked a little bit different from where I was just at. At that point, I was starting to get a little frustrated, but all I could do was just keep walking and finding my path. Again, I looked at the map and what I thought was the correct direction ended up nowhere.

Scott

By 'nowhere', you mean you didn't see anything familiar at all as you kept walking?

John

I just kept walking all day. By the second day, I was starting to get pretty thirsty. I didn't have any water at that point. I didn't think of drinking from the stream yet - the stream that I stepped in that first night. I didn't see it. I couldn't tell what the water was like. When I woke up the next day, I should have thought about it, but I just didn't. I was thinking, "Well, it will certainly gonna take me a couple of hours to get to my car." I wasn't really thinking about anything else. So, by the end of the second day, I was starting to get real thirsty. I didn't even make my way back to that stream until the third day - I just walked and walked and walked all day that Tuesday.

Scott

So you actually haven't had anything to drink since Monday.

John

Yeah.

Scott

So you had nothing to eat or drink since Monday late afternoon or evening.

John

Nothing to eat or drink. By the time - I think it was probably about Wednesday afternoon - I finally made my way back to the stream and started drinking from it, the sun was definitely warm and kept beating down on me. I did some more climbing to try and figure out where the hell I was. The climbing, again, was unsuccessful because everything looked the same pretty much. So, I got down and just kept walking some more. That night was freezing. The wind was blowing very hard. I ended up waking up somewhere very early on Wednesday morning in the rain.

Scott

How did you sleep on Tuesday night? Where did you find the sleep?

John

I tried to find, kind of, a tree. There are trees but they're not a very good shelter, so I tried to lay under the branches the best I could - tried to find it where it was thickest - and it still wasn't enough. I was drenched.

Scott

So it started raining sometime early Wednesday morning and you woke up lost, cold, outdoors, and soaking wet.

John

Yeah. That wind on Thursday, Wednesday, and Thursday night is so unbelievably cold - it was the coldest I've ever experienced. I mean, I've been out camping and hiking at terrains like most of us have, but that was hands-down the coldest. You can hear the wind coming from miles away - it's almost like a train - and, then, once it hit you, it just chills you to the bone.

Scott

So what happened on Wednesday?

John

Wednesday is when I started to get really frustrated. I woke up and I just couldn't believe it. I was thinking to myself, "How did I let this happen?!" I was, kind of, getting to the point where I was thinking, "This might not end well." I was still keeping hope, so I just keep walking. At some point, when I did find that stream again, it was the most satisfying thing, even though it wasn't much. I tried to use my hands as a cup to drink from that stream but it was unsuccessful. So, basically, I got down like a deer and just started lapping it up. I drank as much as I could but, then, I kind of got a second wind. I realized, "Okay, I'm going to try this again." Again, I looked at the map, did my best, and then I got to a certain point where I felt like, "This is it! I think I found my way!" There's a fence over here on the map. There are other land formations. Again, what is supposed to be my trail that leads directly to my car ended up leading me to just more trees and no trail.

Scott

So, you built up that hope that you are almost back where you're supposed to be, but then you realized that you're still just as lost as you were.

John

I guess you could say that I was feeling very hopeful at one point. Then, by the end of the day, I realized that I'm going to be sleeping here for one more night. I was, I guess, downtrodden. I was not only annoyed, but I was just very disappointed in myself that I let myself get to this point.

Scott

Without anything to eat, you got to be just exhausted and starving.

John

At one point, I was just thinking that I can just live off of the water somehow, but I had to keep moving. I couldn't just stay with the water because, according to the map, I needed to go in a different direction to get back to my car. At one point, I found pine trees and, kind of, tried munching on some pine needles hoping that there may be some kind of nutrients or moisture. I did that for just a few minutes until I just couldn't take it anymore - it's not very pleasant.

Scott

It's probably not all that nutritious.

John

Probably not.

Scott

So how did you sleep on Wednesday night? Did you have to go back to the stream?

John

I made my way back to the stream during the day and then I just moved on again, because I just had this determination to find my car. They say - it sounds, kind of, a cliché - even a blind man finds his way eventually, I guess. So, I thought, "No matter what, I just have to keep moving and this is going to work out eventually." That night, I ended up not sleeping so well. Again, I moved so far away from that stream, so I didn't actually have anything to drink that night and the next morning. On Thursday morning, I actually woke up in the snow. I did get a few hours of sleep. When I woke up, there were probably, at least, a few inches of snow all over me. So, basically, I tried to live off of the snow for the rest of that morning, I guess - I ate as much snow as I could handle before my mouth and hands went numb. I had to start climbing in a certain direction to try to think of where I needed to go. There wasn't snow on the ground at one point - a lot of it had melted off by the afternoon. There were certain shaded areas where I was able to get some snow off some branches.

Scott

I would be thinking that if you know what direction you were walking from when you went in - like you were walking east or west or whatever - couldn't you tell which way was East, West, North, or South by the position of the sun and just walk the opposite direction?

John

Yeah, I thought about that too. Well, I wasn't really paying attention, unfortunately - that was definitely one of my faults and things that I did wrong - about where I started. I knew that there was actually an airport out there. I was thinking that - like, in direction to where the planes are coming to and from - maybe I can look on the map and compare that airport to where my car was. So, I tried that as well, but it just kept leading me to walls, like huge ruts in the ground, trees that had fallen over, and all these things that kept blocking me. So, again, I went and climbed around it, but it never ended up really leading me to where I was looking to go.

Scott

Sounds like an escape room on steroids...

John

That's a good way of looking at it.

Scott

So, at that point, you've had nothing to eat and you've been getting by with insufficient sleep. Were you hallucinating at all?

John

Yeah, absolutely. By the end of Thursday, especially, I started seeing - I don't know - just things moving and I was hearing things. I don't know if I was hearing what I thought were voices. I just started, kind of, making up scenarios in my head, thinking, or just hearing - I don't know. It's hard to explain just hearing things that I hadn't heard in the last couple of days. Then, I saw helicopters flying by on Thursday and thought, "Hopefully, this is going to be it. I'm going to try to get their attention." So, I kept yelling. Actually, the last Wednesday and Thursday, I started yelling at the top of my lungs to get anybody's attention, if there was any way that anyone could hear me. When the helicopters were flying by, I waved my arms up in the air. I don't know if they were looking for me at that point, but I saw them flying by a couple of times. Of course, I had no success.

Scott

Do you know at what point you were reported as missing?

John

Actually, on Tuesday, I was going to be meeting up with some friends in Nevada - apparently, that was how the missing person report got out. My friends, **Zeb and Kearson**, were looking to have me over on Tuesday. At some point - either Tuesday or Wednesday - they didn't hear from me which was very unusual because, usually, I make it a point to either keep in touch or show up. So, apparently, they contacted some people - my friends and family - and nobody had heard from me for a couple of days. They, kind of, looked over Facebook and eventually found out that I was heading towards Bryce Canyon.

Scott

So, they were able to figure out through social media that you were planning to go to Bryce Canyon.

John

Yeah. I just happen to make a comment that I was hitting there. I was, kind of, updating some of the posts that I made along the way. I didn't actually mention that I was heading to Bryce Canyon directly until somebody just happened to invite me over to somewhere else in Utah and I told him that I wasn't able to make it because I was heading to Bryce Canyon, and some people just happen to see that comment.

Scott

Thursday... what was your mindset like from mid-day to late-day Thursday knowing that you might spend another night out in the wilderness?

John

By Thursday, it was pretty extreme. Again, I was trying to keep hope alive. While I was walking, I got so exhausted. Since I had no water and no food, I could only make it so far without having long periods of rest. So, I actually passed out many times. I would be walking for, maybe, 20-45 minutes. Again, I just kept climbing and trying to get back to where I was previously. So, I would have these goals set in mind. I would see this rock or this tree or a landmark and tell myself, "Okay, you're gonna do this. If there's any chance you're getting out of here alive, you have to, at least, make it that far." So, after I made it that far, I would find a place where I could just pass out. So, I ended up taking many naps, I guess, throughout the day. Like, I was just so exhausted that I couldn't stay awake. Each time that I felt myself drifting off, I actually thought this was it. I thought, "Well, I'm gonna go out like this. This is really disappointing because I've done some dumb shit over my life and I did not expect to go out just lost in the forest." So, my mindset was not great for the most part, but I couldn't lose hope though - I had to try. So, every couple of hours, I just woke up and kept at it.

Scott

So you never actually got to the point of saying, "Alright, that's it. I'm just gonna die here."

John

I just couldn't allow myself to do that. I kept falling down, especially on Thursday. I was so exhausted to the point that my legs were very shaky and tired even when I was on flat ground - I had been walking almost non-stop for 3 days, so my legs were just so tired and shaky. I was

having a very difficult time just moving at all. So, I would take a few steps and, sometimes, trip over nothing. There were bushes that bushwhacking me over and over again - these bushes have these thorns on them - and kept cutting me over and over again, and I would fall into those bushes. Even though I was going through all that, I was still trying very hard to be as optimistic as possible - it was very difficult.

Scott

That would be quite a mental challenge after several days. I mean, the physical exertion that you were going through is a lot even for someone fueled and hydrated and everything - you didn't have the benefit of that.

John

At one point, on Thursday, I actually got so desperate that, for the first time in my life, I actually tried to drink my armpits, but it didn't go over so well. I mean, all I had in me was just water and snow over the last couple of days. Desperate times call for desperate measures. I was thinking, "I'm so far away from that water. This is all I have, man. It didn't taste great, but what are you going to do?"

Scott

What are you gonna do? That's what Bear Grylls does, right? So, What was that like on Thursday night?

John

On late Thursday, I ended up finding, kind of, like, a mud river. So, I was able to find my way back to clear water at some point on Thursday for just long enough to, kind of, keep going because I was looking at the map of where I was at and thinking, "Okay, well, here's this river. If I just go in this direction, I'm just going to be able to run into a trailhead and, maybe, somebody." So, I kept following the water and it eventually led to, kind of, a mud river. Eventually, that mud river led me to another, kind of, alcove, so I was able to actually find some shelter on Thursday night. I don't think it rained or snowed on Thursday, but it was very cold and windy, so I was pretty grateful that I was able to find some shelter.

Scott

Did you even know what day it was?

John

I wasn't really thinking about that. As I said, I was hallucinating and hearing things - I wasn't clear-minded. There were days that weren't really important to me. I had not even thought of, like, what day it was.

Scott

Friday, you woke up and...

John

Friday was really weird. That night, I actually have a memory of a dream or, maybe, a hallucination - I really don't know. I somehow had a memory or something of me being able to charge my phone somehow just long enough to call Search and Rescue and schedule the pickup time. That was going on in my mind - somehow, I charged my phone just long enough to contact these guys and schedule a helicopter over here by the mud river at 9 AM. So, when I woke up, my head was such a mess. All I could think about was that I had scheduled a

helicopter somehow and I needed to meet them over here by the mud river by 9 AM. I kept, like, waking up every so often, looking at the sun, and be like, "Okay. Well, it's not quite 9 o'clock yet, but I think I have enough time to get over there." Probably, like, an hour or two into walking, I realized that I just made up this whole scenario. I finally had, I guess, a moment of clarity of "They're not coming to get me and I'm doomed. I'm gonna die out here." Friday was when this really hit.

Scott

Because your phone was long dead by then, right?

John

Yeah. The funny thing is it actually died on Tuesday morning. Again, I don't know if I am just remembering this wrong or what, but I had a memory of actually trying to get a hold of my friends whom I was supposed to be meeting up with on Tuesday, and letting them know that I'm not able to make it because I'm lost, and that I'll check my phone after I got it charged the day I get rescued, and that message never went through. So I was thinking that either my phone died as I was texting them or, again, I just made the whole thing up - I really don't know. But yeah, my phone was definitely long dead by Friday.

Scott

Take us to the time when you were actually found and you came into human contact.

John

I kept following that mud River, probably, I guess, for a couple of hours after I woke up. I thought that, maybe, it was another auditory hallucination - I heard voices and somebody yelling. I kind of tried to follow the voices the best I could. Eventually, I saw a couple of dogs and 3 men on horses. I waved and, kind of, yelled at them to get their attention. First, all I did was just ask, "How the hell do I get out of here? I've been here since Monday and I can't figure out where the hell I'm at." So, they said, "Well, if you just keep following this direction, eventually you're gonna hit a trailhead." I don't remember all of what was spoken but, eventually I, kind of, let them know that I felt like dying and anything would be greatly appreciated. So, the kid automatically reached into a pouch and grabbed me a Powerade. His father said, "Hey, let's go ahead and just get you on this horse. I'll take you to the trailhead. We'll come back to get you when we're done here in a few hours, and then we'll take you to your car." So, the father jumped off his horse, got me on it, tells his father and his son, "I'm going to go ahead and take him over to the car, and then I'll meet up with you guys." On the way, he explained that they go there for hunting every year - it's a family thing - and they just happen to be over here. He said that they've never been down as far before or they just normally don't go down as far - it's either one of the two. So, it was just, I guess, pure dumb luck that they happen to be there when I was there.

Scott

They literally saved your life!

John

Oh, yeah. Where I was at, I don't know if search and rescue would have ended up finding me - at least, not for a while. So, they got me to the trailhead. It's pretty hot Friday afternoon. I was able to find one of those signs that, kind of, explains the park a little bit and the trailhead that shows you where you're at. So, on the pavement, I just, kind of, laid there. The man - I can't remember his name, unfortunately, but he gave me a first name - was very kind and he gave me a protein shake, protein bar, another Powerade, a bottle of water - they actually hooked me

up pretty good - and said, "There are other people here. If they get back before we do, just let them know what's going on and they'll definitely be happy to take you back to your car." I actually waited around, I guess, for possibly a couple of hours. By that point, I was obviously pretty miserable. They actually gave me a chocolate bar and also a little KitKat bar, but I couldn't even taste it because my mouth was so dry that I couldn't taste anything even with the Powerade and the water - it was not pleasant at all. So, I consumed the liquids and tried to ration them the best I could.

Scott

At least the Powerade would have electrolytes in it, so it would be rehydrating you to some degree, right?

John

It was amazing. It was the most satisfying thing I could think of at that time.

Scott

It must have been a pretty emotional moment, I would imagine, to realize, "Okay, I'm not going to die here."

John

When I first saw those guys, that was the first human contact I had in almost five days. I had this overwhelming sense of, like, "I might actually be okay. I might actually survive. There are humans." And yeah, I was very relieved just to even see somebody.

Scott

So after waiting - he brought you back there - who did you see next?

John

So after a couple of hours just, kind of, baking in the sun because there really wasn't much shade, I think a dune buggy actually pulled up and I heard a couple of voices. I was laying down trying to just maintain-- I don't know. I was trying to get up very slowly because, again, my legs were really not working at all at that point. So, I slowly got up and, kind of, waved those guys down. As soon as they saw me, I heard one of them saying to the other, like, "Oh, wow. I'm glad that they were wrong." I never asked them exactly what that meant, but I just kind of assumed that they didn't expect anybody or me to be far away over there, at least, at this trailhead. It turned out that they were actually Garfield County Search and Rescue. Again, I wish I had their names because they were awesome and very nice people. They handed me a couple of extra bottles of water and said, "Yeah, we're actually out here looking for you." They immediately took me to an ambulance that was waiting, maybe, 15 miles away or something like that. Then, the ambulance took me to the hospital.

Scott

If they were out looking for you who had been gone for several days, they probably weren't expecting to find somebody still alive.

John

I think there was a comment that was actually similar to that. They're like, "Well, it's not often for somebody to be out here for 4-5 days and still live."

Cody Sherriffs

My name is Cody sheriffs and I'm a local Garfield County Search and Rescue member, as well as a Garfield County First Responder, Bryce Canyon, Utah. What I want to talk about today is what happened that Thursday, May 3, 2019, after our team was called out to search for an individual who had been missing since April 29, 2019 - approximately four days - after hiking into Bryce Canyon's Swamp Canyon Trail. So, at around 11:30 AM, we were dispatched to a male who had hiked down the Swamp Canyon Trail in Bryce Canyon on April 29 and never made it back to his truck. Immediately, our thoughts were, "This is going to be a body recovered due to the weather conditions throughout the 4 nights, which included heavy rain, snow, along with temperatures that dipped into the mid-20s at night." It's hard to believe that anyone that spent a number of nights in those conditions without the proper gear could survive, but John met those odds. So, knowing that this could be a body to recover still does not limit the resources that our incident commander put in place from a team that started hiking down the Swamp Canyon Trail - another team member and myself were driving our search and rescue Wildcat side-by-side from the bottom of the canyon up towards Swamp Canyon Trail - and having a state helicopter pick up one of our incident commanders to survey from the sky. We do not limit our available resources when it comes to rescues no matter what the circumstances are.

So, my partner and I started to search for John from a town called Cannonville, which is 12 miles away from Bryce Canyon. After about an hour into our search, my partner and I came up to the Sheep Creek Trailhead which, for some reason, we both had a gut feeling that we needed to stop and make contact with our incident commander just to let them know how far we've made it, what our location was, and that we had made no contact with our lost person, which is normal protocol. When we stopped, our radio service wasn't all that great due to the remote location that we were at. The signal was probably as bad as it can get - real choppy. So, after about a minute of trying, we both, kind of, heard a voice. As we turned around, a gentleman that had long hair, wearing a light sweater in shorts, appeared out of the bushes. At that point, I asked that individual what his name was, and he replied, "My name is John." I then asked, "John, where did you come from?" He actually pointed up towards the Swamp Canyon Trail at the top of Bryce Canyon and said that he was picked up by some guys on horses and dropped off at the location where he was currently at. At that point, I turned, looked at my partner, and he said "I think we found our guy" which, kind of, blew us away due to the fact that we didn't expect John to be alive due to the conditions that he was left in for the 4 days.

At that point, we rendered John first aid, provided him with water, and performed a quick assessment of John's health, which showed extreme exhaustion and dehydration. His legs were also torn up pretty good from the bushes and anything else that he had walked through or fell down or slid off of. We did our best to contact our incident command with no luck due to the location and the bad radio signal that we were getting. Our dispatch center was able to make up our message stating that we had found our missing guy. At that point, we decided that we needed to get John back to the main road for better service to contact our local ambulance service in Tropic, Utah to meet us in Cannon Ville so that they could further help John and transport him to the Garfield Memorial Hospital, which is about 45-60 minutes away. So, if it was not for that gut feeling that my partner and I had, or the protocols that we have in place to make contact with our incident command to update them, we would have driven right past John - we would have never heard him due to the side-by-side noise levels drowning out everything else - and we would, possibly, not have located John for another few hours, if at all. So, whether it was luck - the right place at the right time - John was found alive. The Garfield County Search and Rescue team and other involved agencies were able to add another very successful rescue to the books.

Scott

So, from there, you went to the hospital...

John

Yeah. Once I saw those guys in that dune buggy, the reality still hadn't quite set in - like, I had a sense of relief. Once I actually got into the ambulance, one of the men who were in there from the search and rescue handed me a sandwich. He was like, "I got sandwiches, and I got an extra one for you." He dressed it all up for me - broke out little packets of mayonnaise and mustard. On man, just the taste of real food was almost enough to just, kind of, make me want to cry - it was just amazing. Everybody was being, of course, so kind. I was able to get, maybe, like, a quarter of that sandwich down, but it was the best quarter of a sandwich that I've ever had.

Scott

What stopped you after the quarter?

John

I was having a really hard time eating. I was very weak and, again, my mouth was so dry that, every time I take a bite, I have to wash it down with, like, half a bottle of water. But it didn't take me too much longer - once I got into the hospital - to regain my appetite.

Scott

When you were examined at the hospital, what kind of condition were you in?

John

Officially, they just put me down as very dehydrated. They didn't really address the superficial wounds that I had, which was fine because those were just all minor cuts. I had been bushwhacked so many times that my whole left calf - I took pictures of it - looked like it was, like, just ripped away. The whole left side of my left calf and part of my right leg were just ripped away, but other than that, I was very dehydrated. Once I was able to get a little bit of rest that night, when I tried to stand up the next day, I would have this excruciating pain in my legs from just standing up. So, it would, kind of, start with the ankle and work its way up all the way up to, like, the knee and it felt like I was just being stabbed by, like, 1,000 little knives in both of my legs - I think it was just from the muscles being overused so much over the last 5 days.

Scott

Yeah, everything was depleted there.

John

Yeah, I have nothing left in me.

Scott

How long were you in the hospital?

John

From Friday afternoon to, kind of, late Saturday afternoon, so just about 30 hours roughly.

Scott

From there, where did they take you back to your car? Were you able to drive home or drive away somewhere? What did you do after that?

John

Luckily, my sister actually came from Idaho - I think she and her friend were heading down to Salt Lake or deciding whether to go to Salt Lake or somewhere else. When they heard that I was in the hospital, they actually came down on Friday and visited me in the hospital. They took my keys, went to pick up my car for me, and drove it to the hospital. So, that was very nice - very appreciated.

Scott

That's a good sister!

John

Yeah, it was pretty cool.

Scott

That's good. Boy, what a crazy adventure! I'm sure you realize how close you were to not making it.

John

Yeah. My sister and my friend came from Salt Lake. They came to visit me and they were, kind of, like, "When you turn your phone on, be prepared" because once my friends, kind of, started getting the word that I was missing - apparently, it hit social media, local radio, and internet, and it escalated from there - I got bombarded with messages. It was really nuts. Yeah, it was overwhelming and definitely life-changing.

Scott

It's, kind of, reassuring to know that there are that many people that care about you.

John

I've questioned that for a little while for no good reason other than, I guess, insecurities, self-loathing, and depression. So, I definitely have no reason to really doubt that people care about me any longer.

Scott

Have you been in touch with your rescuers at all since then?

John

Unfortunately, no. I had no idea how to contact those guys, but I would love to, at least, personally, thank the hunters and the Search and Rescue.

Scott

Yeah, they all played an important part...

John

Very much.

Scott

I know it has only been, like, a month since this happened, but have you gone hiking again since then? Or would you want to go hiking again?

John

I have, actually. In fact, the first real and good hike was yesterday. As a matter of fact, I went up to Boise where there's, kind of, a popular hiking place called Table Rock, which is a good four-mile hike. It was very good for me to get out, stretch, and kind of get back to what I wanted to do. It was a little bump in the road, but that is not going to stop me from following what I want to do.

Scott

That's good. I assume that when you went out on that one, you had a fully-charged phone and, at least, a bottle of water.

John

Yeah. Actually, since then, good friends have given me, like, a survival pack and a personal locator beacon because they don't want me to get lost again. So, I'm fully prepared.

Scott

That's great. What do you think is the biggest lesson you've learned from this experience?

John

Just two things... 1) Tell people where you're going is definitely a very important part. 2) Another thing that I've been hearing over and over again that I definitely agree with is, no matter what, if you're just gonna go out on a hike somewhere, at the very least, bring some of the basics - a bottle of water, a little snack, and maybe a compass, at the very least.

Scott

Yeah, a compass would have been pretty handy for this one, right?

John

Yeah, it really would have.

Scott

John, that's quite a story and experience - I'm sure it's not one that you'd want to go through again.

John

No, man. I'm good. I've led a pretty interesting life and I think that if this is going to be the most interesting thing that happened to me, I'm okay with that. It was definitely a lesson learned and, maybe, it was good for me in a way. It's, kind of, an expensive lesson to learn but, overall, it's been positive since I've been back.

Scott

All part of life experience.

John

Absolutely.

Scott

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