

# LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

## **Hiker's dog kept him warm, ran away**

**By Adriana Gómez Licón / For the Sun-News**

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EL PASO - How Robert Sumrall managed to survive seven days in the frigid and rugged mountains of the Gila Wilderness with a thin orange Windbreaker, a gun, jeans, tennis shoes and a hydration pack remained a mystery Saturday.

His dog, a black Labrador mix named Zulu, helped keep his body warm by lying on top of him, said the people who found him Friday afternoon. He may have also broken into a cabin and tried to start a fire, his stepson-in-law Chris Hoggard said.

The 67-year-old was found near a stream because he thought it could lead him to a safe place, said his daughter Paige Strait.

"It was almost surreal from that state where you are having conversations about a funeral to 'He's alive!'" Strait said.

But none of that matters to Sumrall's family.

"We are here, you are safe," Strait said she told her father when he arrived Friday at the University Medical Center of El Paso.

Strait said Sumrall shed tears when he heard his wife, former El Paso city Rep. Jan Sumrall, was all right.

Jan Sumrall had a chance to talk to her husband on the phone Saturday, though he could not talk back.

"I told him I loved him, and that I was so glad that he was safe and to do what the doctors said because he is as stubborn as he can be," she said.

Zulu, the dog, ran away when Robert Sumrall was found. Sumrall's stepdaughter, Wendy Hoggard, and other volunteers searched for the dog Saturday but did not find her.

And while Robert Sumrall is being treated for hypothermia at the hospital's intensive care unit, doctors appear positive that he will fully recover. His body temperature had risen to near normal.

"He's tough. He's my dad," Strait said.

Robert Sumrall's blood pressure is low, and the hypothermia affected the function of his kidneys, his family said.

Hoggard said Sumrall was in critical condition and under sedation Saturday. He said Sumrall was hooked up to a breathing machine. He also said Sumrall moved his hands, did not open his eyes and then went back to sleep.

Strait said Sumrall may lose one or two toes because of frostbite. There were also some frostbite spots on other parts of his body that looked like scabs.

Melba Parra of Las Cruces, one of the two people who found Sumrall lying near a stream in the fetal position Friday afternoon, said Sumrall mumbled and moaned while she tried to keep him warm and give him water. Sumrall was found in an area called Little Gallinas Canyon near where New Mexico highways 152 and 61 intersect. Parra said he looked confused, and the only words he said were "Oh, my God."

"He was not cognizant enough to tell them his name," Strait said.

Strait does not understand why her father did not fire a handgun he carries on his hikes as a signal, or why he was dehydrated when he still had water left in his pack.

"He may have been so delirious," she said.

Sumrall's family was anguished over his whereabouts all week.

The search for Robert Sumrall began Sunday afternoon after he did not come back home from the hike the night of Nov. 28.

On Sunday, a heavy snowstorm dumped 10 inches of snow where he was hiking in the Black Range of the Gila Wilderness. From Sunday to Tuesday, search-and-rescue crews on horseback and ATVs looked for Sumrall in blizzard-like conditions in temperatures that dropped to the upper 20s.

Volunteers, National Guard soldiers in helicopters and the U.S. Border Patrol also searched for Sumrall throughout the week.

Crews suspended the search Thursday night because temperatures were to fall to the upper teens.

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