



# 2023 Annual Report

## Gallatin County Sheriff's Office Search & Rescue




## 2023

After four years of increasing Search & Rescue incidents, 2023 thankfully broke the trend and showed a decrease in call-outs. Don't get us wrong, we love the role we play in the Gallatin community, but any time we are called upon, it means someone is having a bad day. In the Search & Rescue realm boredom is, ultimately, a good thing. Unfortunately, in the case of 2023, the call-out volume decrease was minor, only about 7%, but at least it stopped the trend of increases.

Over the course of 130 missions, 154 Gallatin County Sheriff's Search & Rescue members devoted 3,484 volunteer hours helping more than 110 people. Volunteers also provided standby support for 14 community events running the gamut from the 45th annual John Coulter Run to the 5th annual Big Sky Skijoring (horse skiing) Competition. In addition to the operational commitments, our volunteers devoted an impressive amount of their personal time to training. All added up, our SAR members racked up a mind-boggling 8,623 training hours to ensure their skills were as sharp as possible for their vital roles in SAR missions. That's only 137 hours short of a full calendar year!





Searches accounted for one third of the missions, while rescues made up the other two thirds. That is a switch from 20 years ago when the numbers were reversed. The likeliest reason for this is that technology like cell phones and GPS text messenger devices have allowed better communication with people in the back country, filtering out many of the searches spun up for people who were "not lost, just late." We also have noted a decrease in search times over the years. There are two likely causes for this: first, searchers are able to communicate in real time, which helps search efficiency; and secondly drone capabilities are increasing at an exponential rate. The use of drones allows searchers to get eyes on a lot more ground much more quickly than on foot, or even in helicopters.

If the first days are any indication, 2024 will be off to a hot start, and there will surely be challenges ahead, but thanks to our devoted volunteers and the support of the communities we serve, Gallatin County Sheriff's Search & Rescue (GCSSAR) will be ready to meet them.

Without further ado, here is the month by month 2023 year in review:



# January

***“Cold. Hope get ttout  
at jight, if hejp come, good.”***

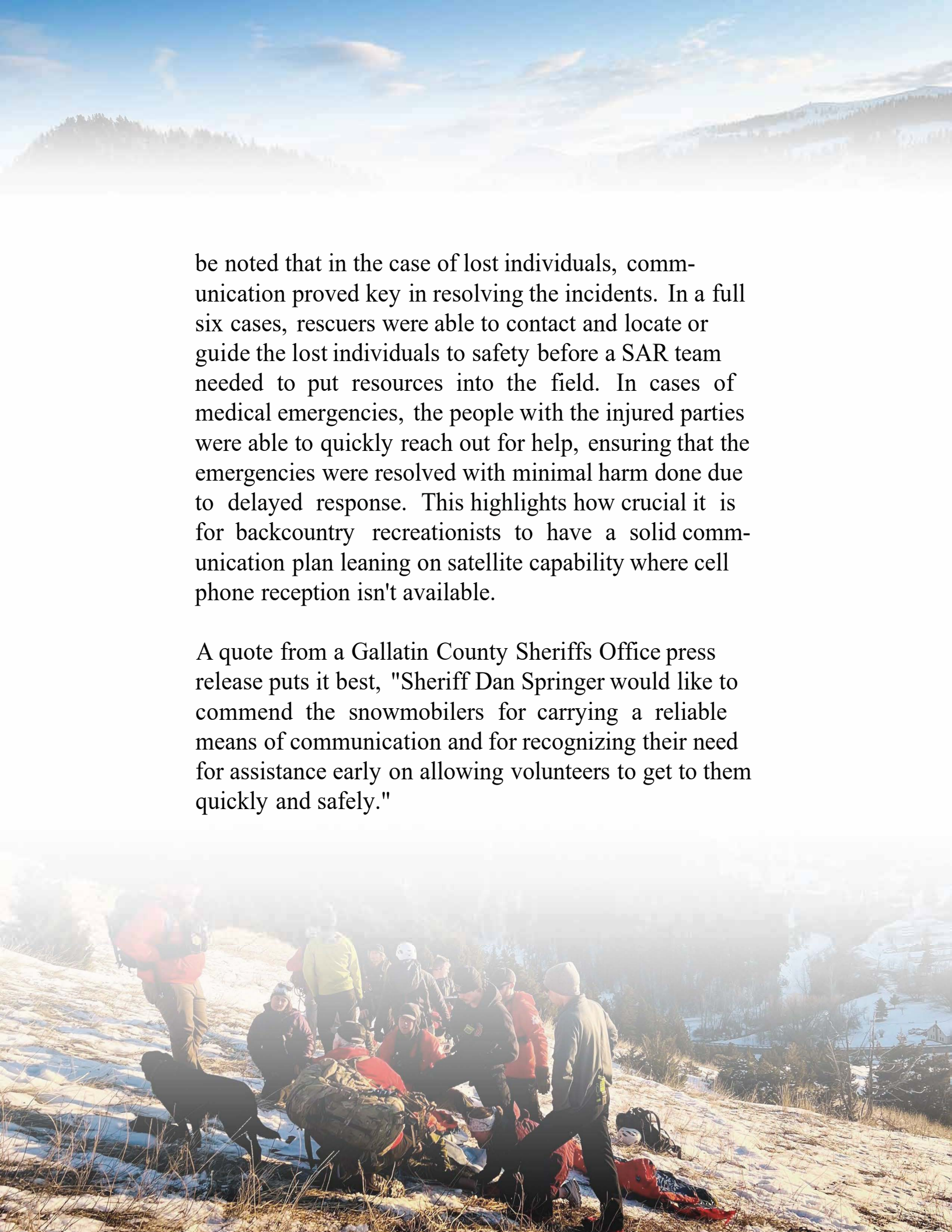
-Lost snomobiler's InReach  
message

With a heavy snowpack laid down in the months leading up to 2023, and plenty of fresh snowfall throughout the month of January, conditions were perfect for winter recreation. Consequently, January was a busy month for GCSSAR; particularly for the West Yellowstone team, who responded to a full half of the 20 emergency responses in the county.

Snowmobiling mishaps accounted for the majority of Search & Rescue efforts in January, with lost or injured snowmobilers needing help in 13 instances. In an interesting coincidence, two elderly snowshoers both required assistance in back-to-back days, and both within a few miles of each other. Two cases of stranded motorists, a skier who sustained knee and shoulder injuries in a fall, and a paraglider crash near the "M" trail northeast of Bozeman rounded out the SAR incidents for the month.

Medical emergencies and cases of lost or stranded persons were split fairly evenly, with broken legs accounting for the lion's share of the injuries. It should





be noted that in the case of lost individuals, communication proved key in resolving the incidents. In a full six cases, rescuers were able to contact and locate or guide the lost individuals to safety before a SAR team needed to put resources into the field. In cases of medical emergencies, the people with the injured parties were able to quickly reach out for help, ensuring that the emergencies were resolved with minimal harm done due to delayed response. This highlights how crucial it is for backcountry recreationists to have a solid communication plan leaning on satellite capability where cell phone reception isn't available.

A quote from a Gallatin County Sheriffs Office press release puts it best, "Sheriff Dan Springer would like to commend the snowmobilers for carrying a reliable means of communication and for recognizing their need for assistance early on allowing volunteers to get to them quickly and safely."





# February

February marked a dramatic decrease in SAR events compared to the month before with less than half the number of responses logged in January. Whether it was due to less snow, fewer recreationists outside due to February winter sports fatigue, or simple good luck, GCSSAR volunteers experienced a much needed respite allowing us to perform equipment maintenance and conduct training to keep our skills sharp. When operational tempo is slow, first responders take the opportunity to train, and in the month of February SAR volunteers conducted 18 training events.

February was also a month for SAR to use those skills gained in training to support community events. Big Sky SAR provided medical stand-by support for the Big Sky Skijoring event providing first aid and off-road patient transport for an event that brought some of the top skijorers in the nation and thousands of spectators. (Skijoring is a timed race in which a horse and rider pull a skier through an obstacle course as quickly as possible.) Furthermore, our Dive Team supported the Special Olympics Polar Plunge Bozeman fundraiser by cutting the hole in the ice and providing rescue swimmers to ensure the safety of dozens of participants.

The most notable incident in February was a back-country skier suffering from exhaustion and vomiting. The skier was located by SAR teams from Big Sky who were able to guide the helicopter rescue team to a nearby landing location and the patient was safely "short-hauled" to a waiting ambulance.



## March

March got off to a regrettable start with West Yellowstone responding to a snowmobile accident where the rider had collided with trees at high speed. Unfortunately, the victim was found to be deceased at the scene. Subsequent snowmobile call-outs had better outcomes, however, with SAR handling two injuries and three cases of stuck or damaged machines. Both cases of injury were broken legs, and in both cases SAR volunteers were able to provide first aid and facilitate transporting the injured individuals to medical care.

Notably, in the month of March, a contributing factor in the majority of cases of accidents or stuck vehicles, was changing snow conditions. Spring in Montana is marked by significant fluctuations in temperatures and at times trail conditions can vary from good to slushy to icy, often changing within just a couple hours. It is always advisable to prepare for a variety of conditions; a perfect morning can get you stuck in the slush by day and then overnighting in below zero temperatures once the sun goes down. Furthermore, it is important to tell someone where you are going, and carry a means to communicate with rescuers in the event plans go sour.

Outside of the off-roading arena, the ability of our various teams to coordinate and cooperate was highlighted when a backcountry skier called for assistance after finding a recent avalanche run-out with ski tracks

leading into it. The skier did not feel comfortable entering the area, but had an indication of a possible locator beacon signal from the edge of the slide. To assist Yellowstone National Park, Gallatin County Sheriff Search and Rescue (GCSSAR) activated the Big Sky Section, West Yellowstone Section, Valley Section, Heli Team, SAR Dogs, and SAR Comms. A hastily built team of National Park Service Rangers and GCSSAR volunteers responded to the avalanche debris field. The team conducted a thorough beacon search and searched the area with a dog trained for avalanche victim detection. An investigation was conducted to identify vehicles in the area and check on the status of the owners. The Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center was contacted for recent avalanche history in the area. The ground search did not find any indicators of buried victims and the investigation determined there weren't any vehicles with unaccounted for individuals. With all of these factors considered, the search was concluded.

Finally, March offered a reminder that Search & Rescue efforts are not limited to the backcountry. A cross-country skier suffered a fall and broken leg while using the trails at Highland Glen Nature Preserve in Bozeman. SAR volunteers provided first aid and used a side by side ATV to transport the patient to a nearby waiting ambulance.



# April

April was another month with a fairly slow pace, but one that highlights an important back-country lesson. Of eight total missions performed by SAR, three were canceled because the missing person was found or the emergency terminated as SAR teams were staging, and two were Drone team assistance for Law Enforcement.

The remaining three responses were: a snowmobiler who, after hours of trying to extract a stuck snowmobile was exhausted and succumbing to the cold; and two back-country skiers, both of whom had their skins fail in heavy, warm wet snow and were stranded and unprepared for darkness as night approached. All three had means to communicate, and GCSSAR was able to locate, warm them, and get them safely back to their vehicles. However, all three suffered some form of equipment failure and were alone in cases where having a partner or group would have kept an unfortunate situation from turning into a dangerous one.

Montana's wild places have a gravitas that makes solitude tempting, but in being alone we are taking a risk in exchange for that peace. It is always safer to have a friend along. And if you ultimately chose to go alone, be sure to make sure someone knows your plan and is updated if you change your plan.

***"No headlamp for darkness. Skins are still too wet to stick to skis. I have some food. Don't know how far I am."***

-Lost Skier 911 call



# May

May saw the end of the snowy season and, thankfully, very little in the way of Search & Rescue call-outs. Only the Valley team logged missions in May, and only one noteworthy mission: a lost hiker on Ross Pass near Fairy lake. A helicopter was able to insert two rescuers who were more familiar with the area and guided the hiker back to the trailhead.

One response was initiated to search for a 10 year-old runaway in Bozeman, but the child was located before SAR volunteers departed Valley Base. The final mission in May was a request for assistance by local Law Enforcement for our Drone Team.

A sterling example of leveraging emergent technology in the interest of public safety is the Drone Team. Members of the Drone Team are certified by the FAA as drone pilots and trained on search techniques. They provide critical assistance on searches, especially over large areas in the mountains where it is hard for volunteers to access quickly. Some of the drones even have thermal-imaging capabilities, which makes them invaluable during night searches. Drones can cover ground quickly and zero in on individuals in need of help, which in turn helps rescuers get on scene faster and guarantee better patient outcomes.



# June

June was the capstone of a slow second quarter with only three missions, two of which were canceled before SAR volunteers took the field. The final call was a pair of lost toddlers at a campground near West Yellowstone.

Volunteers were able to rally the other campers in the area and the missing toddlers were found safe and sound shortly thereafter.

GCSSAR volunteers took advantage of the break in operational tempo to once again lean into training. Basic and advanced rescue rigging, tracking, and aquatic rescue courses headlined a busy training month. All this training is crucial for our volunteers to be able to perform effective searches, rescues, and recoveries in any environment found within Gallatin County. GCSSAR has volunteers trained in twelve technical competencies running the gamut from alpine rescue to underwater diving.

Alpine Rescue



Avalanche/Ski



Boats



Emergency Comms



Dive



K9 Search



Drone



Helicopter Rescue



Off Highway Vehicle



Snowmobile



Medical



Swiftwater



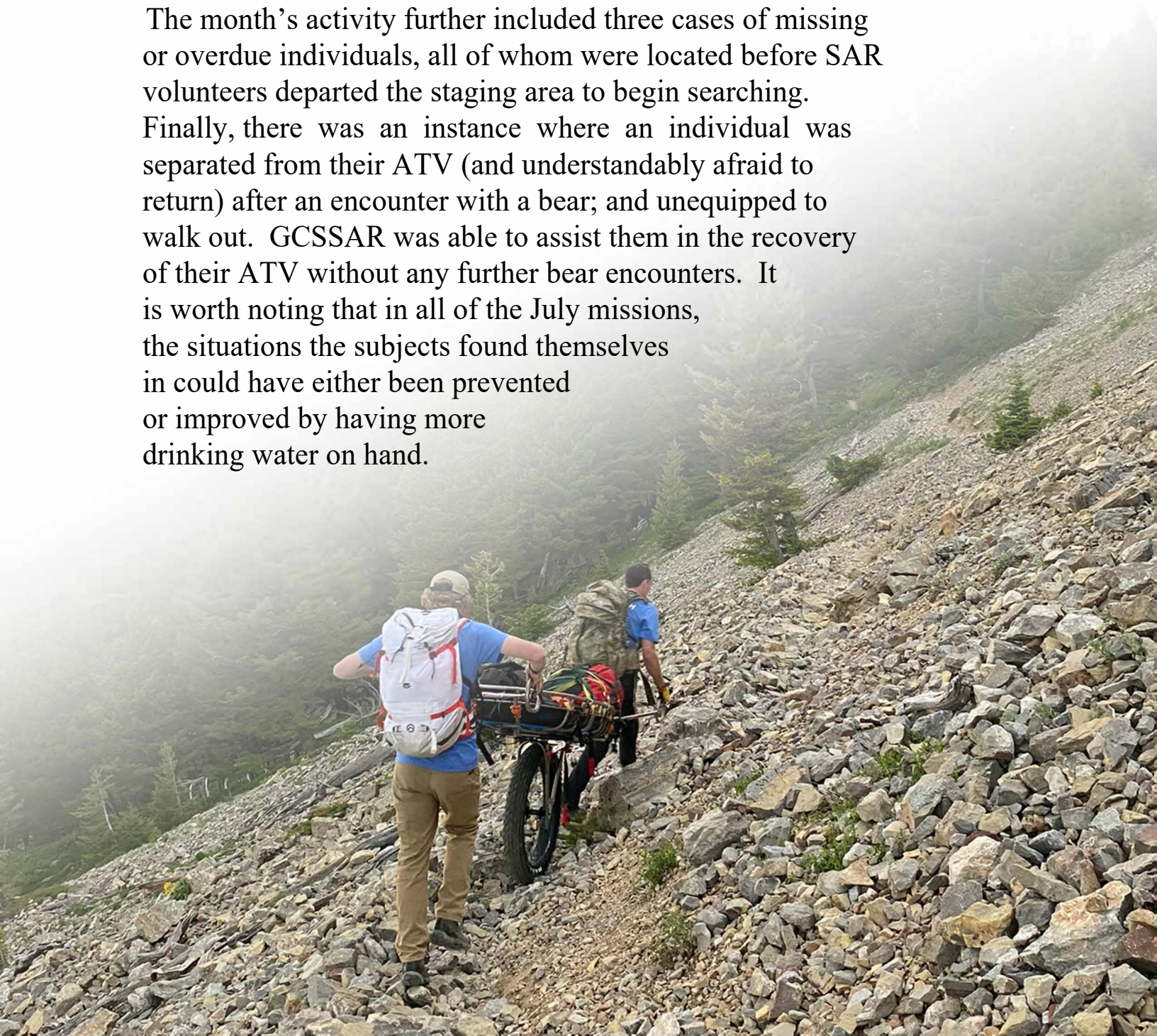


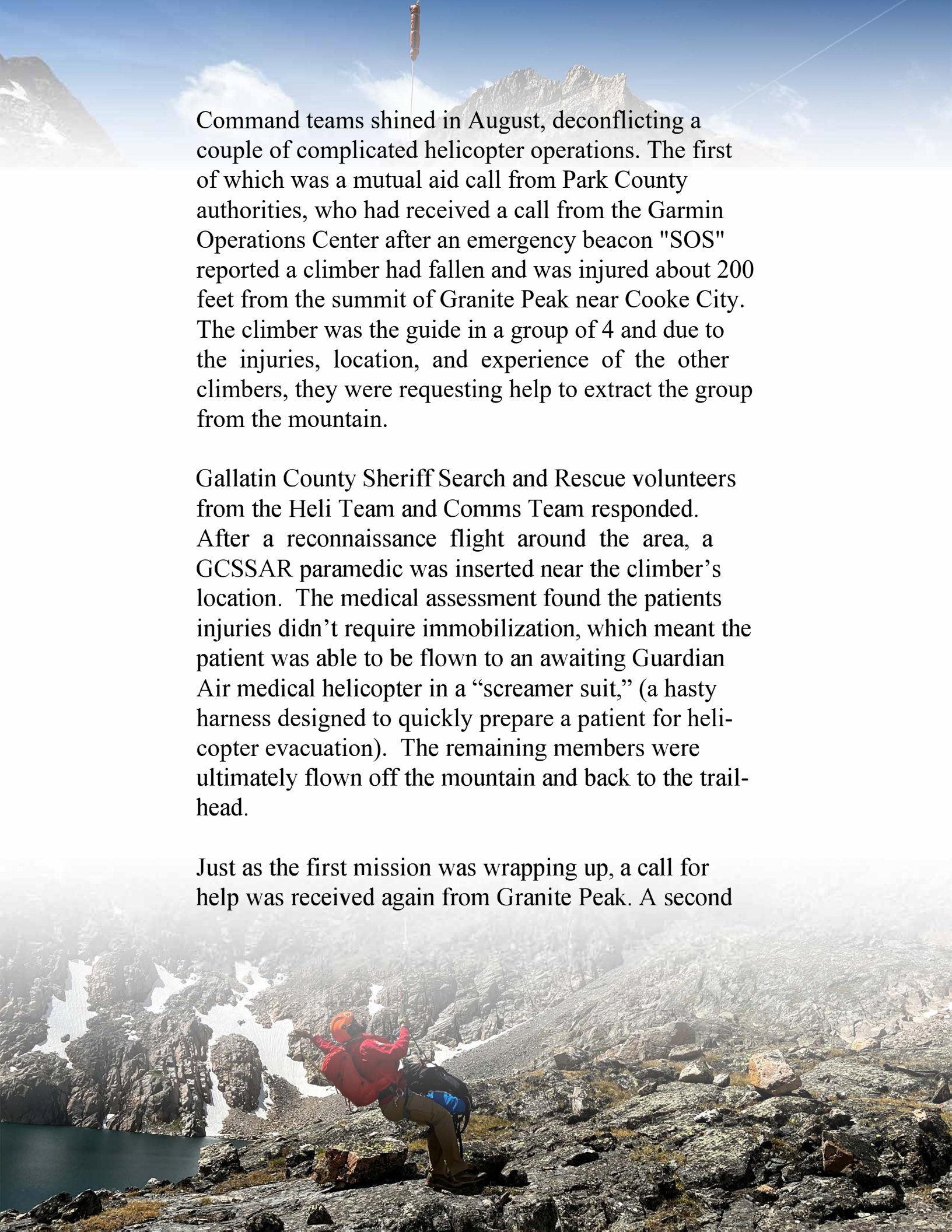
July saw warmer, drier weather and with it an increase in calls for assistance, mostly in the Valley area. Twice our volunteers responded to individuals injured in falls from horseback; in both cases GCSSAR teams were able to quickly locate the subject, provide first aid, and facilitate travel to medical facilities.

The "M" trail is a popular recreational site and in July had its fair share of mishaps. A family with 4 children became lost on a game trail and became stranded due to lack of water and fatigue. Later in the month, an individual injured their ankle while descending the "steep side" trail, SAR volunteers were able to put their alpine and rigging training to good use as rope-work was necessary to safely lower the I-wheel litter down the steep trail. Finally, a pair of backpackers became dehydrated while traveling the Bridger Ridge trail from the "M" to Fairy lake. Rescuers carried water to the pair who were then able to walk to the trail-head under their own power.

July also marked an uptick in water recreation in Gallatin County. In three separate cases, subjects became stranded on islands in the Gallatin River by stronger than usual currents. In two of these cases, kayaks or paddleboards had capsized and the subjects had sustained knee injuries making their way to the islands, complicating rescue efforts. However, in all cases SAR volunteers were able to assist the parties to safety, and aid in recovering any lost equipment.

The month's activity further included three cases of missing or overdue individuals, all of whom were located before SAR volunteers departed the staging area to begin searching. Finally, there was an instance where an individual was separated from their ATV (and understandably afraid to return) after an encounter with a bear; and unequipped to walk out. GCSSAR was able to assist them in the recovery of their ATV without any further bear encounters. It is worth noting that in all of the July missions, the situations the subjects found themselves in could have either been prevented or improved by having more drinking water on hand.



A climber in a red jacket and orange helmet is suspended on a rope, reaching up towards a mountain peak. The background shows a rugged mountain range under a blue sky with some clouds. The climber is positioned in the lower center of the frame, with the mountain peak directly above them.

Command teams shined in August, deconflicting a couple of complicated helicopter operations. The first of which was a mutual aid call from Park County authorities, who had received a call from the Garmin Operations Center after an emergency beacon "SOS" reported a climber had fallen and was injured about 200 feet from the summit of Granite Peak near Cooke City. The climber was the guide in a group of 4 and due to the injuries, location, and experience of the other climbers, they were requesting help to extract the group from the mountain.

Gallatin County Sheriff Search and Rescue volunteers from the Heli Team and Comms Team responded. After a reconnaissance flight around the area, a GCSSAR paramedic was inserted near the climber's location. The medical assessment found the patient's injuries didn't require immobilization, which meant the patient was able to be flown to an awaiting Guardian Air medical helicopter in a "screamer suit," (a hasty harness designed to quickly prepare a patient for helicopter evacuation). The remaining members were ultimately flown off the mountain and back to the trailhead.

Just as the first mission was wrapping up, a call for help was received again from Granite Peak. A second

group of climbers had a member of their group fall and sustain injuries. The injured party was "short-hauled" off Granite Peak and transported by a private vehicle to a higher level of medical care.

The next complicated helicopter operation happened when a pair of hikers near Baldy Mountain needed help. They had started at Fairy Lake early in the day, and one of them had become extremely exhausted and both hikers were out of food and water. The pair was unable to hike down, and with darkness setting in they requested search and rescue.

Gallatin County Sheriff Search and Rescue (GCSSAR) volunteers from the Valley Section, as well as a helicopter from Billings Clinic MedFlight responded to the request. An initial team hiked in from the "M" Trailhead and was able to access the party on foot where they assessed the patient and treated them for exhaustion and cold exposure. A second ground team used off-highway vehicles from Bridger Bowl, then hiked South to bring additional gear to the patient. This second team was ultimately able to locate a landing zone for Billings MedFlight near the hikers, but weather prevented extraction prior to sunset. The party was then assisted down the mountain by GCSSAR personnel



throughout the night, and by morning another landing zone was identified, and the pair and GCSSAR team was airlifted to the trail-head.

August saw four other instances of recreationists needing help in the back country; a bicyclist with a broken arm, a horseback rider who suffered multiple injuries after a fall, a jogger with a hyper-extended knee, and a hiker who had expressed possible suicidal ideation. Notably, in all cases, SAR was able to locate and assist quickly because of emergent technologies, specifically E-Bikes and drones.

Finally, August was a big month for Big Sky community relations as they supported three major events.





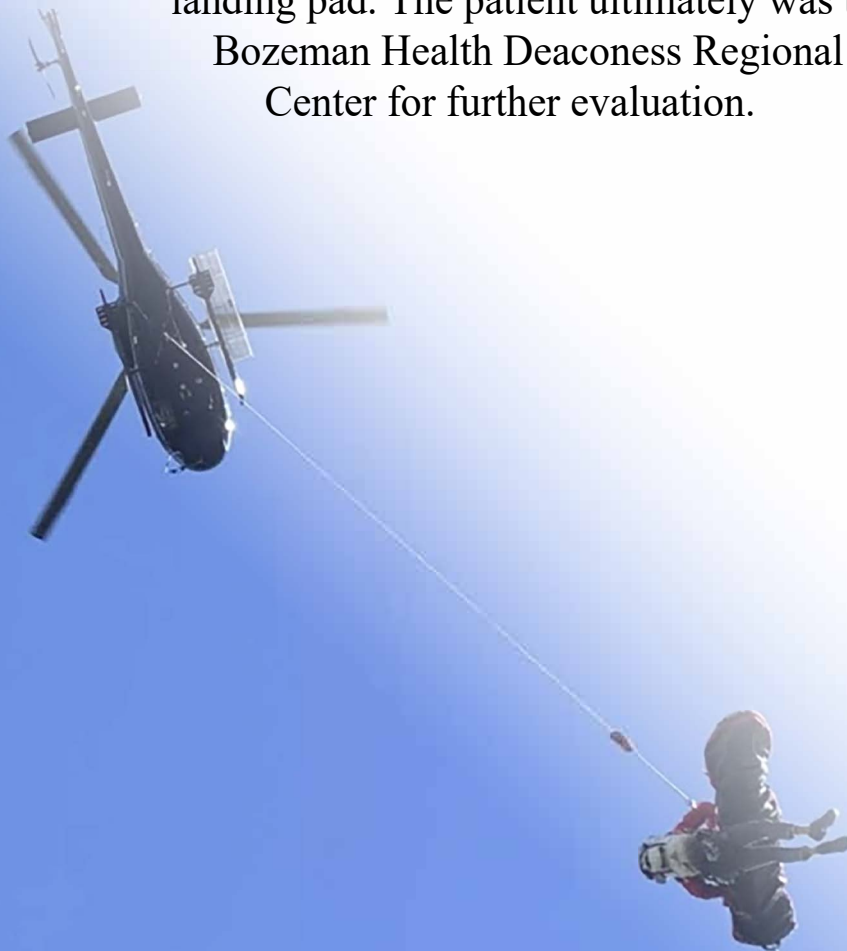
## September

September saw the return of cooler weather, which came in to play when a hiker got a late start and ended up cold and stranded by darkness near the Garnet Mountain fire lookout. GCSSAR was able to acquire the code from the United States Forest Service, and the hiker was able to shelter in the lookout until Valley team arrived with off-highway vehicles to help him back to the trail-head.

Foul weather was also an issue when a hunter fell and broke an ankle off-trail in the area of West Yellowstone. The hunter's companions were able to assist him out of the thick timber he was in, but daunting terrain lead to the decision to use a helicopter despite the wind and sleet. The hunter was ultimately "short-hauled" to a waiting ambulance.

There was also a search for a teenager who had left his running group but safely returned to his home on his own, plus an elderly hiker who was showing signs of a possible heart attack near Ousel Falls and was assisted by SAR members who happened to be nearby. But the highlight of September was a response to a grizzly bear mauling.

On September 8th, Madison County Dispatch requested help from GCSSAR for an individual near Yellow Mule Trail outside of Big Sky. This individual had been attacked by a grizzly bear while hunting whitetail deer. His companions were able to chase the bear away, but the attack left the hunter in dire need of immediate medical aid. GCSSAR team members, along with Gallatin County Sheriff's deputies, arrived at the scene of the attack, provided first aid, and placed the patient in a "screamer suit" to short-haul the patient to a more robust helicopter air ambulance waiting at a nearby landing pad. The patient ultimately was taken to Bozeman Health Deaconess Regional Medical Center for further evaluation.



# October

October was a light month, but with two significant SAR responses. Other than a quick game of hide-and-seek with a lost hiker, and a Drone Team call out to assist Law Enforcement, the first significant call came near West Yellowstone where a horseback rider suffered a dangerous fall. The rider had sustained multiple injuries after being bucked off a horse and needed immediate medical care. Volunteers from GCSSAR and a helicopter responded to assist with the rescue. Due to the severity of the rider's injuries and time being of the essence, the Air Methods helicopter was dispatched directly to the patient's location. The flight crew was able to quickly locate, evaluate, and transport the patient to Bozeman Deaconess Hospital. The rider was later transferred to Billings due to the nature of the injuries.

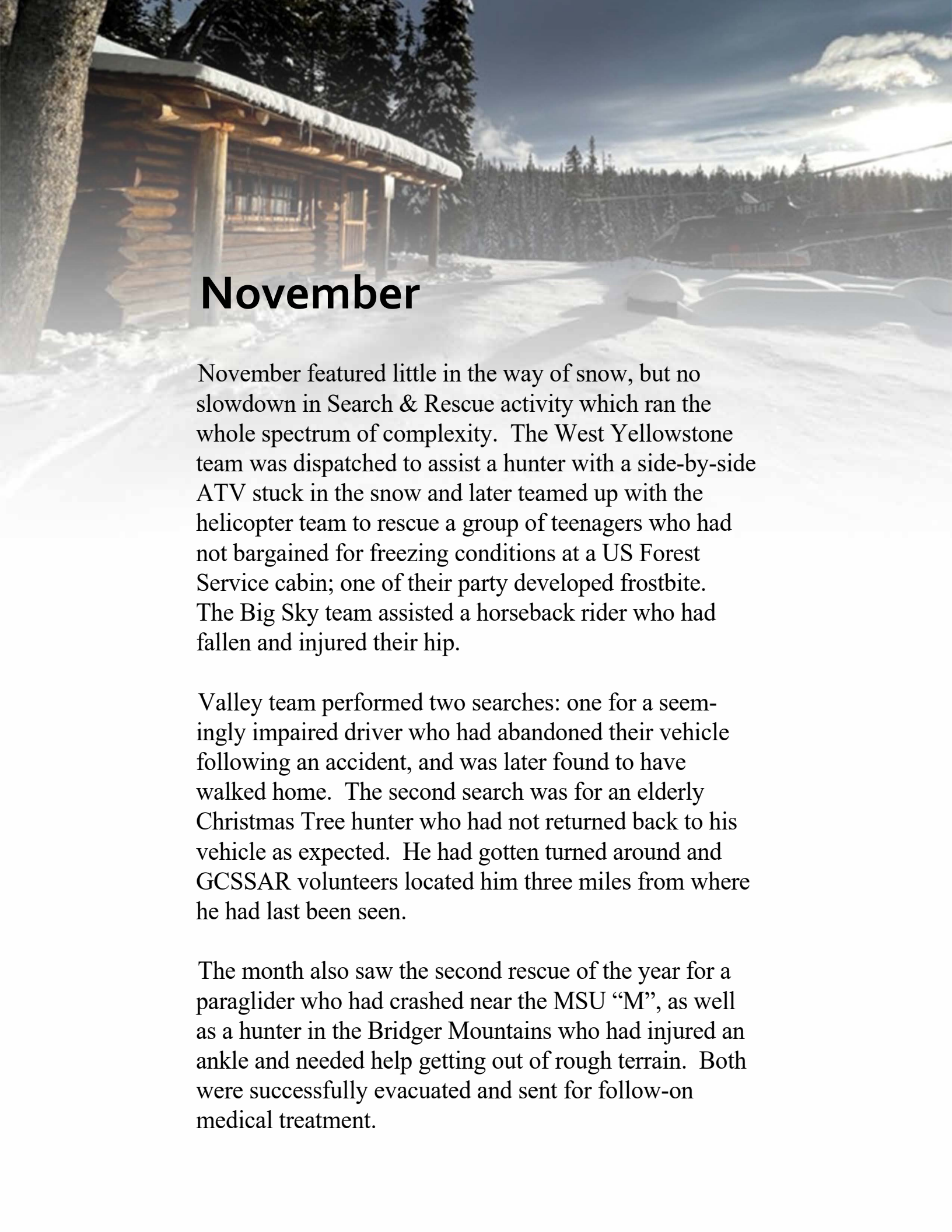
The second significant rescue happened when Gallatin County 911 received a call for what was initially thought to be a hang-gliding accident near the





Rockhaven Camp and Retreat Center in the Gallatin Canyon. It was later discovered the incident was actually a BASE jumping accident and the patient had suffered a possible neck injury. The BASE jumper had fallen along the cliff face after deploying their parachute and landed on top of a steep, rocky incline.

The Gallatin County Sheriff Search and Rescue Valley Section responded to the area. Alpine certified volunteers deployed to the patient where they used low angle technical rope rescue techniques to get them to the waiting ground crews. Once down, the ground crews transported the patient via one wheeled litter to the staging area. Ultimately, the patient was flown by air ambulance to Bozeman Health Deaconess Regional Medical Center for further evaluation.

A scenic winter landscape featuring a rustic log cabin on the left, partially covered in snow. The ground is a smooth, snow-covered path leading towards a distant mountain range. In the background, a helicopter with the tail number 'NB14F' is visible, parked on a snowy field. The sky is a mix of blue and white clouds, suggesting a bright but slightly overcast day.

# November

November featured little in the way of snow, but no slowdown in Search & Rescue activity which ran the whole spectrum of complexity. The West Yellowstone team was dispatched to assist a hunter with a side-by-side ATV stuck in the snow and later teamed up with the helicopter team to rescue a group of teenagers who had not bargained for freezing conditions at a US Forest Service cabin; one of their party developed frostbite. The Big Sky team assisted a horseback rider who had fallen and injured their hip.

Valley team performed two searches: one for a seemingly impaired driver who had abandoned their vehicle following an accident, and was later found to have walked home. The second search was for an elderly Christmas Tree hunter who had not returned back to his vehicle as expected. He had gotten turned around and GCSSAR volunteers located him three miles from where he had last been seen.

The month also saw the second rescue of the year for a paraglider who had crashed near the MSU "M", as well as a hunter in the Bridger Mountains who had injured an ankle and needed help getting out of rough terrain. Both were successfully evacuated and sent for follow-on medical treatment.

Unfortunately, November also saw the second back-country fatality of the year when an ice climber slipped and fell from the “Dribbles” route in the Hyalite ice climbing complex. GCSSAR volunteers were in the area, having recently done some climbing themselves, and the fallen climber was located and assisted as quickly as could be hoped for. However, the injuries sustained were too severe, and the individual succumbed later in the hospital.



# December

December offered some consolation, with another ice climber fall eerily similar to the November fatality. In this case, however, the GCSSAR helicopter team, in concert with Valley volunteers were able to package the patient and helicopter short-haul them to a waiting ambulance. These twin incidents highlight the fact that even in a county like Gallatin with world-class Search & Rescue, sometimes luck can be the biggest determining factor when it comes to outcomes.

Two calls for distraught runaway teens were quickly resolved, with both found shortly after the search was initiated in the days leading up to the Christmas season. GCSSAR also came to the rescue of two friends who had bypassed a US Forest Service gate, gotten their vehicle stuck, and were not dressed for a cold march back to better roads. The last days of 2023 finally saw some snow and consequently two rescues near the Big Sky area, with GCSSAR volunteers staging successful rescues of a backcountry skier who had broken an ankle and two snowmobilers who had sustained injuries in a wreck.

Looking forward to 2024, Gallatin County Sheriff's Office Search & Rescue hopes for a slow and boring year in which Gallatin County residents and visitors alike can safely enjoy our little slice of The Last Best Place. However, if unfortunate luck comes calling, our SAR volunteers will be ready to intervene and turn bad days into better ones.

