

# SATELLITES & SEARCHES

Handheld devices that work without cell signals proved their value earlier this week in the snowy Wallowa

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Baker City Herald

A search and rescue operation tends to be considerably simpler when you take away the search part.

The handheld devices that link to satellites orbiting Earth, and allow people to communicate even in places where cell signals can't penetrate, make it increasingly likely that rescue crews, before they start, will know precisely where they need to go, Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash said.

"They're becoming more common to have them out there," Ash said on Wednesday, Oct. 27.

While describing one such recent episode, the sheriff, who has been involved in many searches since joining the sheriff's office in 2005, still was deficient on sleep after going 36 hours without so much as a nap.

Ash coordinated the rescue of Robert Derald Borders, a 67-year-old Baker City man who was stranded by an unusually potent autumn storm in the Wallowa Mountains earlier this week that brought 2 feet of snow followed by torrential rain and winds strong enough to topple trees.

Rescuers from Baker and Union County search and rescue teams reached Borders about 2 p.m. on Oct. 25.

He didn't need medical treatment and was able to ride his horse back to the trailhead, guided by the rescuers.

Although the operation was severely hampered by weather that in its severity shocked even Ash, an experienced outdoorsman, the sheriff said Borders' use of a Garmin inReach satellite device helped immensely.

The unit allowed Borders to send text messages to friends, who then alerted the sheriff's office to his plight about noon Oct. 24.

Equally important, the device pinpointed his location, so rescuers didn't waste any time in potentially fruitless searching.

"If we didn't know where he was, and had to search all that area, that's a multi-day event," Ash said. "Having that precise location, we just had to figure out how to safely get to him."

Chris Galiszewski, coordinator for the Baker County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue team, said the devices, which generally cost between about \$300 and \$600, can truly be life-savers. "We're not guessing where people are," he said. "We know where people are."

Galiszewski said the satellite devices are especially useful in places such as Northeastern Oregon where cell service is limited, or



Union County Search and Rescue/Contributed Photo

Volunteers donned snowshoes to reach a man stranded in the Wallowa Mountains on Monday, Oct. 25, 2021.

completely absent, in many places.

The southern Wallowa Mountains, where Borders was overtaken by the storm, is one such region.

Ash said he had only marginal service on his phone even when it was plugged into a signal booster in his vehicle.

But the Garmin inReach and similar devices sold by other manufacturers use satellites, which cover pretty much every patch of ground on Earth.

With such a device, users can send brief text messages — usually limited to 160 characters — to a predetermined list of cellphone numbers, Galiszewski said.

The units also have an emergency button that will send a signal to a dispatch center, he said.

In addition to the cost of the device, users pay a monthly fee for the satellite service.

Garmin, for instance, charges, \$11.95 per month for its basic plan, which includes 10 text messages.

The cost is \$14.95 per month for subscribers who don't want to commit to more than one month of service, according to Garmin's website.

Ash said that although the sheriff's office has occasionally received calls after a user accidentally hit the emergency button, he is a proponent of their use.

"They're a very helpful tool, and can be life-saving," he said. "I think it's a great tool in that sense."

Both Ash and Galiszewski also emphasize that other

simple — and free — precautions can help backcountry travelers avoid potential tragedy.

They urge people to always let friends or family know their itinerary, and to set a time when they will either return or be able to send an update by phone.

That way, Galiszewski said, people can call police if a person, or party, is overdue.

"It was miserable" Ash's story about the rescue of Borders illustrates that dangerous winter storms aren't confined to that season in the high country of Northeastern Oregon.

Borders, who had four horses, was packing in supplies from Cornucopia, about 9 miles north of Halfway in eastern Baker County, to a hunting camp near the Baker-Wallowa County border.

The camp is near Soldier Lake and Sugarloaf Mountain, at the southern edge of the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon's biggest wilderness area at 365,000 acres.

The terrain is typical of the Wallowas, Ash said — steep, rugged, heavily forested.

The elevation where Borders was stranded is about 7,400 feet.

Borders rode out of Cornucopia on Oct. 23. The National Weather Service had forecast a major storm for the weekend, and in blizzard conditions Borders struggled to find the trail as he rode toward the camp, according to a press release from the sheriff's office.

See Searches, Page B3



Union County Search and Rescue/Contributed Photo

Deep snow made it difficult to use vehicles during a rescue operation Monday, Oct. 25, 2021, in the Wallowa Mountains.

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