



Shanda McDonald/Contributed

Shanda McDonald and Sean Belknap.

RESCUED

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Belknap and McDonald, in addition to their camping gear, had brought along a Garmin GPS unit equipped with an inReach satellite connection. By pressing a button on the device, they sent a signal, via a network of orbiting satellites, that alerted law enforcement that they needed help. The signal also pinpointed their location.

There is no cell service in that area.

Belknap said he pushed the button at 2:50 p.m.

Within two minutes they received a text message on the device, from the Grant County Sheriff's Office, as the location is in that county.

Ash said the Grant County Sheriff's Office asked him to coordinate the rescue because the place where the couple was stuck is closer to Baker City than it is to Canyon City, where the Grant County office is.

That request came about 3:52 p.m., slightly more than an hour after Belknap sent the alert.

Ash said he contacted the company that monitors the emergency network for Garmin devices. He was able to have a text message sent to Belknap and McDonald, telling them to stay with their pickup and that rescuers would likely arrive before 7 p.m.

Ash said the rescue effort came together quickly in part because he knew, through the text messages relayed by the satellites, that the couple were not hurt.

That meant he didn't have to bring the sled-like "snow ambulances" that can be towed by ATVs or snowmobiles.

Ash said he talked to Peter Johnson, general manager at Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, and the resort had its snow groomer, snowmobiles and other equipment available if it was needed.

"We have a really good relationship with Anthony Lakes," Ash said.

Ash said Belknap and McDonald told him they had planned to continue their trip by driving to Hells Canyon and then taking the Hells Canyon Scenic Byway through the mountains to Joseph.

Ash had an immediate response to that idea. "No, you're not," he told the couple.

Ash's insistence was based on a recent experience.

On Thanksgiving Day he rescued a man whose car got stuck in snow on the Hells Canyon Byway. He didn't want Belknap and McDonald to have to deploy their satellite device again so soon.

As it turned out, Belknap said he and McDonald won't be able to visit Hells Canyon anyway.

Belknap said he talked with Superior Towing in Baker City on Tuesday, but too late to head into the mountains to recover his pickup that day.

He planned to do that on Wednesday.

"We're running low on time" for their vacation, Belknap said.

They planned to leave Baker City on Thursday morning for the thousand-mile drive back to San Diego.

Despite the unexpected interruption, Belknap said he and McDonald have enjoyed their vacation.

"It was a good trip," he said.

"I honestly don't know what we would have done. They so generously volunteer their time to help those in need, and we could not be more thankful to them."

— Shanda McDonald, talking about Baker County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue members

thankful to them."

The couple's pickup was stranded about 6 miles southwest of Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort. The Elkhorn Drive Byway is not plowed of snow or otherwise maintained during the winter between the ski area and Granite, a distance of about 23 miles.

The couple were near Badger Butte, at an elevation of about 6,600 feet.

Ash said he and three Baker County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue volunteers set up a command post at the Grande Ronde Sno Park just west of Anthony Lakes.

Volunteers in three side-by-side ATVs, equipped with tracks rather than tires, left the command post at 5:47 p.m., arriving at the stuck truck at 6:16 p.m. They picked up Belknap, McDonald and their dog, Maisy, a 6-year-old shepherd mix that McDonald, who works in a veterinary hospital, adopted.

All were fine.

"The crew was fast-acting, kind, and did not make us feel even more stupid than we already did!" McDonald wrote in a text message to the Herald on Wednesday morning.

Belknap, who works as a Toyota repair technician, said he and McDonald have taken many previous road trips. They usually camp in secluded forests and are accustomed to traveling in remote areas.

During their first visit to Oregon, the couple were using as a guide a book describing the state's scenic byways.

On Sunday, Dec. 6, they embarked on the Blue Mountains Scenic Byway, which runs from Interstate 84 through Heppner, Ukiah and on to its end at the North Fork John Day River. There the byway connects to the Elkhorn Drive Byway.

Belknap said they camped Sunday night between Heppner and Ukiah.

"It was really cold," he said. On Monday the couple continued driving east on the Blue Mountains Byway, passing through Ukiah.

Belknap said he saw a sign east of Ukiah, where the byway begins climbing into

the Blue Mountains, noting that the paved, two-lane route is not maintained for winter travel.

But he said the snow wasn't deep and there were vehicle tracks. He said he figured that although the route wasn't maintained, neither was it closed.

The problem, he concedes now with the benefit of hindsight, started at the junction of the two byways.

He had two choices.

If he continued straight, Granite, the nearest town, was about 9 miles away, and Sumpter about 24 miles.

If he turned left he would have to climb almost 2,000 vertical feet to Elkhorn Summit. At 7,392 feet, it's the second-highest point reached by a paved road in Oregon, surpassed only by the Rim Drive in Crater Lake National Park, which tops out at about 7,900 feet.

Belknap said he turned left because, based on the scenic byways book, the route past Anthony Lakes was the shorter path to Baker City. (The junction is actually almost at the midpoint of the 106-mile Elkhorn Drive Byway.)

Belknap said he was worried at that point about his gas supply, as he had burned more than he expected driving through snow for 40 miles between Ukiah and the byways junction.

What he didn't know is how much elevation the Elkhorn Drive Byway gains between the junction and Anthony Lakes. Or how deep the snow would be.

Still, Belknap said he felt well-prepared for the situation.

He said he lived in Colorado for eight years and has considerable experience driving four-wheel drive rigs in deep snow.

"I've been off-roading since I got my first Tacoma 11 years ago," Belknap said.

His current truck is equipped with 35-inch-tall tires — about 4 inches taller than stock tires — and he said he reduced the tires' air pressure to about 5 psi when the snow deepened. That's



Baker County Sheriff's Office

Volunteers from the Baker County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue team arrived at 6:16 p.m. Monday to rescue a San Diego couple whose pickup became mired in snow.



Shanda McDonald/Contributed

Maisy is a 6-year-old shepherd mix. Shanda McDonald, who works in a veterinary hospital, adopted the dog.

a common tactic to improve traction, as tires with less air spread out and have a wider footprint, which increases their surface area and helps them "float" on snow or sand.

Belknap said he was somewhat hesitant to continue. There were no fresh tire tracks — only snowmobile tracks — and as the grade steepened, he said, "it was more of a challenge" to maintain momentum.

He also became more concerned about gas, as he was driving in first gear and with the transfer case in low range, a combination that, though helpful in low-traction driving, also causes gas mileage to plummet.

Belknap said he's sure he could have made it through had the snow been fresh, light powder.

But most of the snow in the Elkhorns fell a few weeks ago. During the ensuing dry spell the snow has consolidated due

to freeze-and-thaw cycles and from the passage of snowmobiles.

Ash said that even the track-equipped rescue ATVs were sinking slightly in the relatively soft snow.

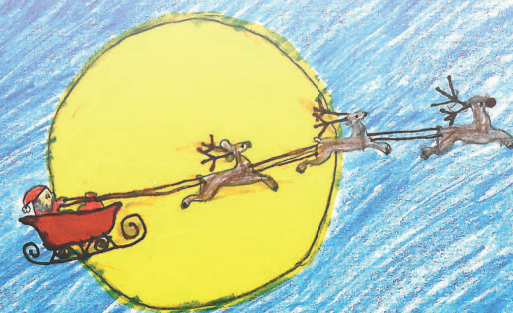
McDonald said Belknap couldn't get enough traction to free the truck even when using the winch. McDonald said they eventually decided to stop trying so as to save gas in case they were stranded for a long period and needed to run the engine to heat the cab.

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Ash said he talked to Peter Johnson, general manager

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ONLINE TICKET SALES STARTED MONDAY, DEC. 7

Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort selling daily tickets

By Jayson Jacoby
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

Season pass holders have made tracks in the snow at Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort the past two weekends, and now other skiers and boarders will get their chance.

The ski area in the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City opened Saturday and Sunday, Nov. 28 and 29, and the following weekend, for people who bought season passes.

But starting on Monday, Dec. 7, Anthony Lakes began selling daily tickets through its website, www.anthonylakes.com

A limited number of tickets is available — the resort isn't setting a specific number for any particular day — for this coming weekend, Dec. 12 and 13, and then for every day, except Christmas, from Dec. 19 through Jan. 3, said Chelsea Judy, Anthony Lakes marketing director.

People who are staying with one of the resort's lodging partners — a list is posted on the website — will qualify for a discounted lift ticket

and do not need to buy one online.

Anthony Lakes is also offering guaranteed daily tickets, for \$15, for all Baker School District students who show their student ID at the resort, Judy said. They don't need to buy a ticket online.

The offer is intended in part to replace the annual Ski for the Health of It program for students, which won't happen this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

And Anthony Lakes is setting aside 20 tickets each day, at a 50% discount, for people who have a receipt, from within seven days of buying a ticket, from any locally owned restaurant or retail shop in Baker, Union, Grant or Wallowa counties.

Judy said the first two weekends were limited to season pass holders to give resort operators a chance to gauge the challenges of maintaining social distancing.

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