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Close to 200 people search for Victoria hiker missing near Sooke

Search-and-rescue teams from Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland have intensified efforts to locate a missing Victoria woman.



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Search-and-rescue personnel search for Melissa McDevitt near the Charters Creek fish hatchery in Sooke on Saturday, Dec. 17, 2022. The Victoria woman was last seen in surveillance video from the parking lot on Dec. 9. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

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UPDATE: The search for Melissa McDevitt has been suspended, Sooke RCMP said Monday.

Search-and-rescue teams from Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland intensified efforts to locate a missing Victoria woman on the weekend.

Paul Berry, president of Comox Valley Search and Rescue, said 170 professional search volunteers, including dogs teams, were on the ground Saturday looking for Melissa McDevitt and will continue their search at first light Sunday.

The 38-year-old was scheduled to travel from Victoria to Vancouver on Dec. 10 for a flight to North Carolina to visit family. Her grey Subaru Forester was found in the parking lot of the Charters Creek fish hatchery in Sooke that same day.

Just before 2 p.m. on Dec. 9, a surveillance video captured the avid hiker in the parking lot carrying hiking poles. A powerful windstorm hit Vancouver Island that night, leaving thousands without power.

“We anticipate it will be a recovery operation, given the time that has elapsed — unless Melissa sought shelter some place where she has food and water and sufficient warmth,” Berry said Saturday afternoon from the command centre at the hatchery. “But based on everything we’ve covered today, we believe that highly unlikely.”

On Saturday, the searchers were briefed on McDevitt’s background, her family and her passions, he said.

“The [search-and-rescue] community in B.C. is an amazing group of people. Their No. 1 goal is to attempt to locate her so she can be returned to her family,” Berry said.

The search area is rugged, with thick vegetation, he said, and searchers are planning to go back out Sunday if needed.

“Locating Melissa is going to require looking under every leaf, every tree branch, behind every fallen log, any place she could have found refuge from the storm she was out in on Dec. 9,” he said.

It was raining during Saturday’s search and snow is expected to fall late Sunday afternoon, which would make the search more difficult.

Berry said he appreciated all the input from people in the community who know the area well and have helped guide the search planning.

He also encouraged people to continue using the area for recreation.

“If this is an area where they walk their dogs or hike, we’re not deterring them from doing that, and if they see anything ... let us know,” he said.

McDevitt is described as petite — about five feet tall and slim, weighing about 105 pounds — and could initially show signs of cognitive delay. She has alopecia but could be wearing a wig or have short hair dyed in rainbow colours.

Her father, Tom McDevitt, travelled from North Carolina to help in the search. He is now returning to his home in North Carolina, Berry said.

Anyone with information is asked to call Sooke RCMP at 250-642-5241 or Victoria police at 250-995-0765, extension 1.

ldickson@timescolonist.com

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