



THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

Editor: Bryna Hallam > Telephone: 250-380-5333 > Email: localnews@timescolonist.com

Search called off for missing hiker in Sooke area

PEDRO ARRAIS
Times Colonist

The search for a Victoria woman last seen leaving the parking lot of the Charters Creek fish hatchery in Sooke with hiking poles was suspended on Monday, after an exhaustive search by search and rescue agencies from across the province found no trace of the 38-year-old.

On Saturday alone, nearly 200 people logged close to 1,700 hours, working in extremely thick vegetation, to try to locate Melissa McDewitt, who was spotted on surveillance video Dec. 9, the day before she was scheduled to fly to see her family in North Carolina.

"The Sooke RCMP, along with Ms. McDewitt's family, wish to extend their sincere appreciation to Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue, along with over 17 other assisting search and rescue agencies from across Vancouver Island and other parts of British Columbia, for their significant search efforts over the last nine days," said Sgt. Kevin Shaw, acting Sooke RCMP detachment commander, in a statement issued just after noon on Monday.

Search and rescue teams from Vancouver Island were joined by personnel from other parts of the province, including dog teams — who showed up over the weekend to assist in the search.

While searches of up to 10 days are not uncommon, the search for McDewitt has been one of the largest undertaken in the past decade by volunteers, who spent upwards of 5,000 hours looking for her, said Paul Berry, president of Comox Valley Search and Rescue.

Sooke RCMP will maintain an open missing-person file should any new information come to light, and missing-person posters will be placed at trailheads in the area to remind people to be on the lookout for McDewitt, who is described as five feet tall and weighing about 105 pounds.

Security video captured McDewitt as she left the parking lot of the Charters Creek fish hatchery, after parking her grey Subaru Forester there on Dec. 9. A possible scenario is that the avid hiker got caught in the powerful windstorm that swept Vancouver Island the day of her disappearance, Berry said.



Search and rescue personnel gather at the SAR Command Centre at the Sooke River Jack Brooks Hatchery during the search for Melissa McDewitt on the weekend. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST



Melissa McDewitt has been missing since heading out for a hike near the Sooke Potholes on Dec. 9. VIA VICTORIA POLICE

"She may have got caught in the storm and sought refuge, wrapping herself in vegetation to keep warm," said Berry. "The vegetation in the area is so thick that searchers walking three metres apart, wearing high-

visibility clothing, are unable to see each other."

He said that the area where McDewitt disappeared, a few minutes from Sooke Potholes along the Sooke River Road, looks open at first, but quickly becomes dense bush.

The search for McDewitt is one of 74 Comox Valley Search and Rescue has undertaken in the last year.

Berry advises people heading outdoors to leave a trip plan — informing someone where they are going and when they expect to return home. "The sooner someone sounds the alarm, the sooner we can start to look for them," he said.

Most of those who encounter mishaps or get lost can call for help using their cellphones if they are in range, but help can take time, which means people going into the wilderness need to be prepared, he said.

"Most people forget that the further out they are, the longer

it takes to respond — sometimes hours, so water, waterproof clothing and high-energy food is also important," said Berry.

"They also neglect to have enough back-up power. Time and time again, we get a call at the end of a day. The people are lost and their phones only have two or three per cent of their power left."

While it is possible to "ping" a phone to get its location, it doesn't work if the phone is dead.

A headlamp is also handy, both to help you find your way in the dark, and as a signal for rescuers, Berry said.

While a phone's GPS can show where someone is, without cellular service, they can't summon help should they get in trouble.

Some outdoors enthusiasts now carry satellite communicators that operate in areas without cell reception. Some can pair with a cellphone to send texts or emails to pre-determined con-

tacts in case of an emergency — or to let them know you are safe.

A subscription to satellite services is necessary, although some are free for a trial period.

The new Apple iPhone 14, which debuted in November, offers emergency SOS via a satellite connection as well. It is expected other phone manufacturers will jump in to include the feature in future models to stay competitive.

"These are amazing tools, with the new ones not just for SOS," said Berry. "They can mean the difference between life or death."

He also urges people to check out Adventuresmart.ca, a national program dedicated to encouraging people to get informed before they go outdoors.

The goal of the program is to try to reduce the number and severity of search and rescue incidents through education. parais@timescolonist.com

Grant helps charity help out-of-sight seniors



JACK KNOX

Christmas packages for seniors are being assembled in a corner of the Soap for Hope Canada warehouse in Vic West.

Puzzles, games, chocolates, toques, handwritten Christmas cards, that sort of thing, all in addition to the toothpaste and shampoo and other hygiene products that regularly go out the door to those who need, but can't afford, them. It looks like Santa's workshop, or at least what Santa's workshop would look like if he took personal health more seriously.

The Christmas packages will be distributed through New Horizons and go out to nine seniors facilities around Victoria that Soap for Hope Canada works with on a continual basis. That's why the non-profit got a grant from the Times Colonist Christmas Fund this year — to make life a little easier for older people who, out of the spotlight, aren't always top of mind.

That's the thing about need. It isn't always obvious. We might all be familiar with the scene on Pandora Avenue, but that's just the most in-your-face side. Isolated seniors are much less visible. So are low-income fami-



Anne McIntyre, executive director of Soap for Hope Canada, in the charity's warehouse. Soap for Hope is getting a Times Colonist Christmas Fund grant to help with the cost of Christmas packages for seniors in Greater Victoria. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

lies. So are other, unconsidered pockets of need.

"I feel we're in the little cracks and crevices, trying to help those who don't always get a hand up," says Anne McIntyre, the charity's executive director. She's standing in the middle of the William Street warehouse from which, despite its appropriately out-of-sight innocuousness, 1.2 million items flowed to recipients all over B.C. last year.

It's a remarkable operation that combines frugality with generosity. At the heart of it all is the relationship the charity has with B.C. hotels that, instead of sending half-full and gently used items to the dump, divert them to an organization that can put them to good use.

All those little hotel-sized

bottles of shampoo, conditioner, lotion, body wash and whatnot that you leave in your room? They go to Soap for Hope Canada, where volunteers pour them into larger empty containers donated by the public. ("We buy no packaging," McIntyre notes) before forwarding them on to hundreds of other organizations, including 97 in Greater Victoria.

Seniors get their soap in easy-to-squeeze containers. Families get somewhat larger ones. A bulk-user like Our Place might get a four-litre jug.

It's not just soap that gets collected. Anything a hotel needs to get rid of that has a usable life can be donated. Linen, bathrobes, furniture, half rolls of toilet paper, whatever.

Mattresses are the only item they refuse. "I want us to be something that the hotels can't say no to," McIntyre says. One day, 2,400 pillows arrived from a single hotel.

Linen is stacked high in the warehouse. When floods and wildfires chase B.C. families to evacuation centres, the sheets they sleep in come from William Street.

Even last month, the charity was still outfitting Camp Hope, a church retreat that morphed into a shelter for people displaced by the fire that razed Lytton in 2021. These days, lots of bedding goes to Ukrainian refugees moving into their own apartments.

Soap for Hope gets unclaimed items when hotels empty their

lost-and-found stashes, too. On this day, 100 pounds worth have arrived from Jofino — clothing, mostly, including a Kenneth Cole black leather jacket. It will go to the building's upstairs thrift store, Second Hand Hope, which is open 9-4, Monday to Friday.

One third of what gets distributed by Soap for Hope is, at least, thanks in part to other charities and donations from the public.

A shipment of 5,000 toothbrushes from the Calgary-based Tooth Fairy Children's Foundation just came in. Feminine hygiene products arrive and are distributed on behalf of the United Way. Corporate benefactors help, too: Diamond Delivery and ACE Courier ship goods for free, bless 'em.

McIntyre would welcome more donors and volunteers. People can drop off new or partly used hygiene items or linens — particularly towels and shampoo/conditioner/body wash/body lotion bottles.

The Times Colonist Christmas Fund, which has funnelled grants to more than 40 Vancouver Island charities this year, is happy to take contributions, too. So far, it has collected \$615,078.40 in donations from 2,256 donors. The fundraising goal for the campaign, which began Nov. 12, is \$1 million.

How to donate to the Times Colonist Christmas Fund

- Go to timescolonist.com/donate, which is open 24 hours a day and provides an immediate tax receipt.

- Mail a cheque to the Times Colonist Christmas Fund, 201-655 Tyee Rd., Victoria, B.C. V9A 6X5.

- Use your credit card by phoning 250-995-4438 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Friday.