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Alaska State Troopers Deal with Seven Rescues in Five Days

The Department of Public Safety responded to seven calls for rescue from different parts of the state since Thursday and helped save six people in peril. A search for a man who went out hiking on Suemez Island near Klawock Sunday night is still underway in Southeast Alaska.

Of the successful search and rescue operations in the past five days – five people were medically evacuated due to either injuries or illness suffered while enjoying the outdoors.

Troopers, the Rescue Coordination Center and volunteer search and rescue organizations among others are gearing up for a busy season as tourists and Alaskans alike flood to Alaska's wilderness with the start of summer. These will likely continue to increase due to greater access to the wilderness, more tourists, more citizens without proper training or precautions and the proliferation of bigger and more powerful outdoor toys. SARs are very time consuming and expensive in manpower, effort and money and by their very nature hazardous for those searching for the lost. The development of remote communication devices, such as satellite phones, global positioning systems, personal emergency locators and expansion of cell phone range allowing 911 calls to come in from all over the state have also impacted the number of search and rescues. At the same time, using these tools increases the likelihood of finding a person alive.

By statute AS 18.60.120, the Department of Public Safety is responsible for overseeing Search and Rescue operations within the state of Alaska. In certain instances, the responsibility is shared with the U. S. Coast Guard, Alaska Air National Guard Rescue Coordination Center and National Park Service. However, a search for a missing or lost person can occur anywhere in the state – in a community or in the wilderness, pulling AST resources from other calls and cases – and at any given time as this past week shows.

The recent rescues also come at the end of National Volunteer Search and Rescue week. There are roughly 48 volunteer organizations statewide. In 2009, a total of 4,176 volunteers joined with troopers to spend a total of 57,762 hours of searching in Alaska. Of the 805 people that went missing in 2009, 595 people were rescued in Alaska and 46 bodies were recovered. Fourteen people are still considered missing. The rest made it out by means outside an AST-organized response.

So far this year, AST has responded to 139 search and rescue operations, which is on par with the 141 SARs AST responded to by May 24 of last year.

Alaska State Troopers ask people to be careful and be properly equipped to handle what Mother Nature hands them while traveling in the outdoors. Many of the searchers place themselves in harms way and leave their jobs and families at a moment's notice to look for a complete stranger. Leaving information about your trip plan, such as a [Wilderness Trip Plan](http://www.dps.state.ak.us/PIO/docs/WildernessTripPlan.pdf) (<http://www.dps.state.ak.us/PIO/docs/WildernessTripPlan.pdf>), with a responsible adult that will report you overdue and increase the chances of a successful rescue.

The search and rescues Alaska State Troopers responded to in the past five days include:

- At 10:38 p.m. on May 20, Soldotna AST received a 911 call from a man reporting his hiking partner, Brett Frazier, 22, of Anchorage, slipped on snow pack while hiking in the area of O'Malley Peak, fell about 10 feet and suffered a dislocated shoulder. Due to his injury, Frazier was unable to hike out to the trailhead. Anchorage-based Alaska State Trooper helicopter Helo 1, with a member of the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group on board, was dispatched to assist in locating the hikers. The AMRG rescuer was dropped off on a ridge and hiked to Frazier's location and help Air National Guard pararescuers hoist the injured hiker into an Alaska Air National Guard Pavehawk. Frazier was transported to Alaska Regional Hospital by the helicopter

- At 2:21 p.m. hours on Saturday, Gale H. Armstrong, 60, of Eagle River called 911 requesting assistance. Armstrong had been kayaking in the Narrow Strait near Spruce Island when his kayak overturned. Armstrong was unable to get back into his kayak and was unable to make it to shore. Armstrong was unprepared for immersion in 40 degree water, but had on a personal flotation device and was able to use his cell phone to call 911. Alaska Wildlife Troopers conducted an emergency response in patrol vessel P/V Ethics from Kodiak Harbor. Alaska State Troopers and Alaska State Parks Rangers responded to Miller Point Battery at Fort Abercrombie to direct P/V Ethics to Armstrong. P/V Ethics arrived on scene at 4:19 p.m. and rescued Armstrong. AWT transported Armstrong to Kodiak where he was being treated at Providence Kodiak Island Medical Center for hypothermia as of 5 p.m. The U.S. Coast Guard was notified and made several radio emergency calls for help and prepared a HH-60 for launch. Two off-duty AWT troopers were fishing in the area and responded to the mayday radio calls from the USCG. Use of a PFD was a key factor in this successful SAR.

- At 3:50 pm on Saturday, Soldotna dispatch received a call reporting a snowmachine crash that happened within a few miles of the parking area at Mile 68 of the Seward Highway. Troopers responded via snowmachine and met up with the complainant and the victim, Kenneth Karcz, 24, of Anchorage. Karcz was jumping his snowmachine when the snowmachine lost power in mid-air, dipping the nose down. Karcz slammed into the handlebars on the landing and vaulted over the handlebars and ended up underneath the snowmachine. Karcz suffered numerous broken bones and was airlifted by Lifemed from the scene to an Anchorage hospital for treatment. Personnel from the U.S. Forest Service, and Girdwood and Cooper Landing emergency medical services responded to the area to help in the medical evacuation

- At 5:37 p.m. on Saturday, trooper from Girdwood, Alaska State Parks, Alaska Mountain Rescue Group, and Helo 1 responded to the area of Flat Top Mountain in Anchorage for the report of an injured 16-year-old female approximately 500 feet from the top. It was reported the female had sustained head and neck injuries while sliding on the snow from the top of the mountain. Once in the area, Helo 1 was able to land approximately 200 yards from the victim. The terrain did not allow getting closer. A member of the Alaska Mountain Rescue Group hiked down to help medically assess the girl's condition and help pararescue jumpers from the 210th Rescue Squadron who arrived a short time later. The victim was then loaded aboard the Pavhawk helicopter and transported to an Anchorage area hospital for treatment of her injuries.

- At 6:15 p.m. on Sunday, Fairbanks Troopers received a phone call from Daniel Vischansky, 35, of North Pole, who reported his friend needed to be rescued. Investigation revealed that Vischansky and his friend Jay West, 48, of Fairbanks, were traveling on the Koyukuk River by boat when the boat got stuck on two boulders. Both men were able to make it to the riverbank, but they lost their gear and food. For three days, the two men walked downriver until they came to a place on the south fork of the river. Vischansky was able to cross the river by swimming, but West was too cold and weak to cross. West advised he would wait there until rescued. Vischansky walked approximately eight hours until he reached Coldfoot. At 10 p.m. hours, an Alaska Wildlife Trooper piloted Helo 2 from Fairbanks to locate and rescue West. At 10:45 p.m. West was located by Helo 2 approximately four miles from the Dalton Highway, downriver at the south fork of the river. West was found to be in good health and was transported to Coldfoot by Helo 2.

- At 12:04 a.m. on Monday, Alaska State Troopers in Delta Junction were notified of a request retrieve an ill person in the Cantwell Glacier area. A group of campers from the National Outdoor Leadership School were camped in an area on the glacier, when a 26 year-old-male in their group became ill with possible appendicitis. The group was at least five miles from the Richardson Highway, making ground transportation impossible. AST's Helo 1 was once again dispatched from Anchorage and arrived on site at 3:27 a.m. hours. Helo 1 airlifted the patient to Mat-Su Regional Hospital at the group's request.

- Just 20 minutes later, Ketchikan Alaska State Troopers received a call reporting Van Huffman, 54, of Naukati was overdue from a hiking trip on Suemez Island. Mark Christopherson, 40, of Naukati reported that he and Huffman drove to the end of a washed out road. Huffman left for a hike with his dog Sunday morning and was due back that evening. Huffman took a knife and matches, but was reportedly not dressed for adverse weather conditions. Klawock EMS responded to Suemez Island, along with searchers who are familiar with the area.

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