

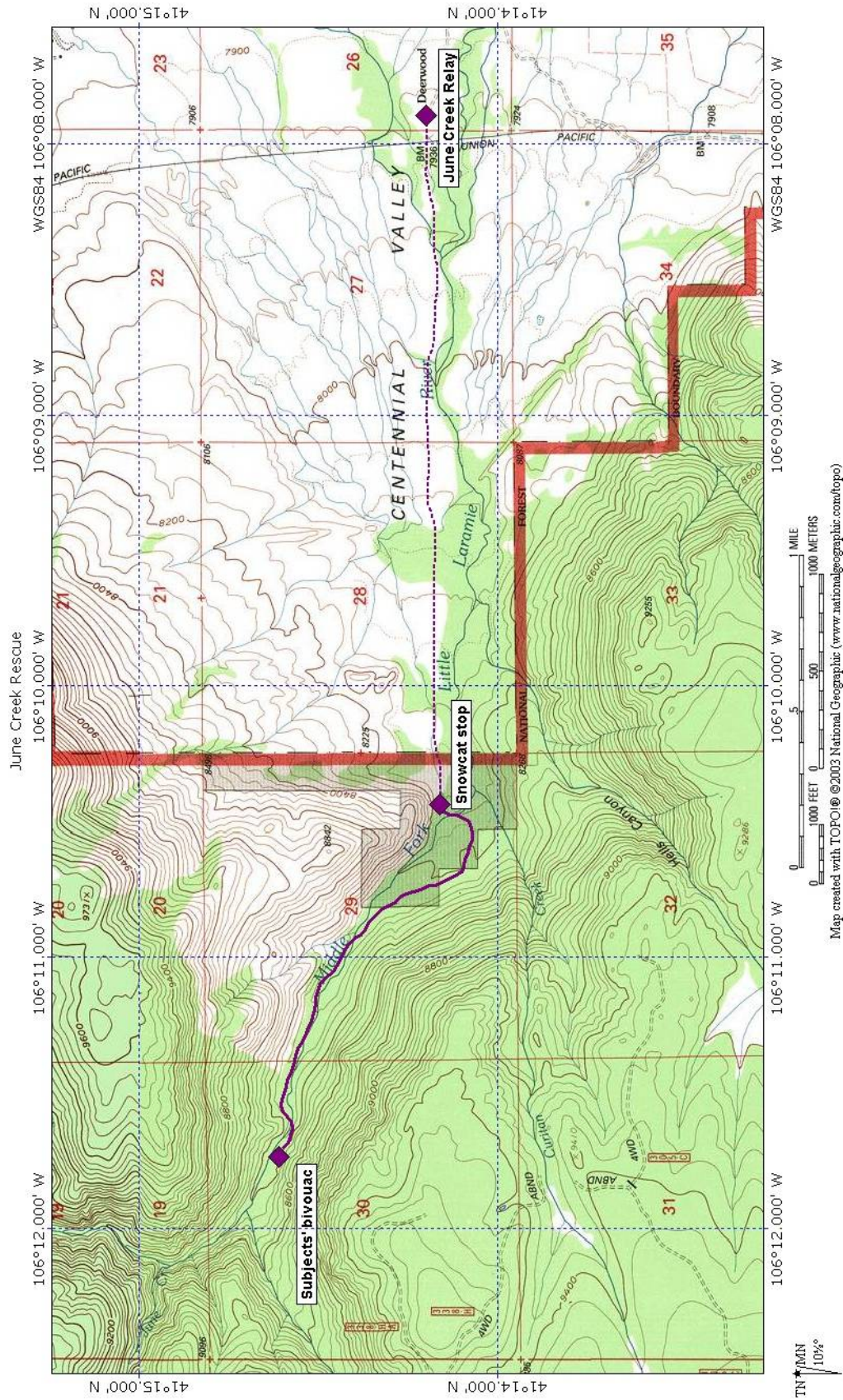
## June Creek Rescue, 1 January 2006

### SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Time	Event
11:30	Neil Mathison (Albany County Sheriff's Office) contacts Medicine Bow Nordic Ski Patrollers for help in evacuating 4 snowmobilers stranded overnight in an area described as Hells Canyon, south of Centennial Ridge. Myron Allen and Jerry Hamman meet Neil at the Sheriff's office in Laramie at about 12:15. Joe Pohl leaves Snowy Range Ski Area to join the search party.
13:15	Rescue party assembles at Deerwood Ranch, south of Centennial. We wait for a snowcat, skin up skis, and plot GPS coordinates reported by the subjects via cell phone. Coordinates show that the subjects are not in Hells Canyon but in Middle Fork Little Laramie River canyon, in steep narrows below the June Creek confluence (see map). The temperature is in the low 20s (F), with overcast skies, light snow, and west winds up to 15 mph.
13:45	In a snowcat, the rescue party proceeds west along a ranch road from Deerwood Ranch, accompanied by Kevin Lundahl (Sheriff's Office snowcat driver), Rich Wilson (Deerwood manager), and Colton Wilson (Rich's son).
14:15	Snowcat reaches the end of the road near the southern foot of Centennial Ridge, WGS84 41° 14.171'N, 106° 10.433'W. Mathison, Allen, Hamann, and Pohl continue on skis, each carrying snowshoes. Colton, who's familiar with the canyon, accompanies them. Travel is slow, winding through aspens, thick lodgepole pines, and pesky willows. (During this period, radio traffic indicates that a search for different subjects has been organized in the vicinity of Libby Flats, where high winds and limited visibility are hindering factors.) A faint smell of campfire smoke eventually reassures the rescue party that the reported coordinates are close to correct.
16:25	Rescuers reach the subjects at WGS84 41° 14.610'N, 106° 11.702'W. The subjects are tired and hungry but otherwise in good condition: warm, dry, with no medical problems or injuries, and in reasonably good spirits. There are 4 men ranging in age from mid-20s to late 40s.
16:45	With twilight falling, subjects put on the snowshoes, douse their fire, and pack survival gear for the trip out (see photo). The snowmobiles have to stay behind, trapped by the tight terrain and thick vegetation. One snowmobile is in the creekbed.
19:00	Rescue party and subjects reach the snowcat, after a slow trip through the forest by headlamp. The skies have cleared, but the moon is only newly waxing, so there is only starlight in the narrow canyon sky to aid navigation.
19:20	Rescue party and subjects reach the Deerwood Ranch in the snowcat. They unload, take care of administrative details, and get updates on the Libby Flats search, which has been scaled back for the night because of near-zero visibility above timberline. (Sheriff's personnel found that lost party around 2:15 the next morning.)
20:15	Rescuers drop subjects off at their vehicle in Albany. Everyone heads home.



Subjects and rescuers at the subjects' bivouac site, shortly before starting the nighttime trek out of the forest.



Map created with TOPO® ©2003 National Geographic (www.nationalgeographic.com/topo)



## Comments

1. The Road and Bridge radio frequency worked reasonably well in simplex (talkaround) mode between the Middle Fork canyon and the incident command post (“June Creek Relay”, at Deerwood Ranch). Contact with the Road and Bridge repeater on Jelm Mountain was possible en route but often broken. Remarkably, the subjects managed to get a cell phone call out of the canyon, which is not only remote but also hidden from cell towers by complex topographic barriers. The fact that they first reached 911 in Rawlins by a very weak signal suggests that the signal traveled via reflection on nearby mountains — perhaps Sheep Mountain in combination with the eastern scarp of the Medicine Bow Mountains.
2. The subjects did many things right once they were stuck: they stayed together and in place in safe terrain, built a fire, used a cell phone to relay useful coordinates (41° 14.664' N, 106° 11.85'W, [no datum]), and kept themselves reasonably warm and well hydrated.
3. Fortunately there were no medical problems in this incident. Evacuating a patient by litter would have been extremely difficult in this terrain. Toboggan management would have been arduous, if not impossible, and the topography would have made short-hauling by helicopter risky, especially at night. Evacuating the 4 snowmobiles will be a challenge.
4. The incident illustrates the value of carrying over-snow travel gear, such as snowshoes, on snowmobiles. The main service provided by rescuers in this case, aside from navigation and a little food and water, was bringing snowshoes to the subjects so that they could self-evacuate.
5. The incident also illustrates the utility of 1:24000-scale topographic maps, especially for snowmobilers headed off-trail. The subjects (as well as the 3 January news account in the *Laramie Daily Boomerang*) were under the incorrect impression that they were in Hell’s Canyon, a perception that may have come from using a smaller scale USFS travel map. The precise coordinates, together with Scotty Davis’s inference that the subjects’ bivouac site was in Section 30, T15N R78W, helped avert a time-consuming and fruitless excursion into possibly dangerous terrain.
6. The rescue party and subjects were fortunate that they didn’t have to spend the night of 1-2 January in the woods. A less efficient path to the bivouac site, a less fit party, rougher terrain, or deteriorating weather could have made it impossible to get out as soon as we did. This observation serves as a reminder that nordic patrollers on rescue missions need to be at least minimally prepared to bivouac. It is useful to check everybody’s level of preparation explicitly before departing on the mission.