

# Family stranded in woods aided in own rescue

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Jen Woodside, a search commander with the York Sunbury Search and Rescue, used her 2010 Jeep Wrangler to locate and rescue a family who became stranded in the wilderness after their utility terrain vehicle (commonly referred to as a side-by-side) broke down.

Photo: Emma Davie

A family who was stranded in the remote wilderness outside Utopia when their utility terrain vehicle broke down late Monday night was rescued by authorities early the next morning.

Cpl. Chris Henderson of the St. George RCMP detachment said several officers were involved in the late-night-turned-early-morning ground search, which stretched into early Tuesday and ended around 4 a.m. Rescuers found the man, woman and child walking along a trail in a remote area near Route 785 in Utopia, about 60 kilometres east of St. Stephen.

To assist with the search, law enforcement officials also called on trained professional volunteers from Charlotte County, York-Sunbury and River Valley Ground Search and Rescue units.

“It’s a good night when you get to bring people home,” said Jen Woodside of Fredericton-based York Sunbury Search and Rescue.

With eight years of experience in various roles within the unit, Woodside grabbed her gear at her Burton home and got behind the wheel of her 2010 Jeep Wrangler after hearing her emergency pager start beeping.

Unbeknownst to her at the time, the orange-coloured heavy duty vehicle - rigged with upgrades like LED spotlights, floodlights and custom bumpers - would play a pivotal role within the next few hours.

The race against time originally began around 11 p.m. Monday when police received a 911 call from a driver that his off-road utility vehicle had broken down in a heavily wooded area near Utopia. He told authorities there were two others with him, including a child under 10 years old.

It was imperative the family be found fast. The longer they remained outside, the higher the risk of injury due to exposure or hypothermia.

Throughout the search, Woodside communicated with the family by text to help zero in on their location. The remote area’s unreliable cellphone service made phone calls “useless,” she said, so they relied on text messages instead.

“Reception was so slow he could not even bring his map up on his phone,” she said.

“(Text messages) were basically brief descriptions like ‘I’m on this side of the lake’ and ‘we came from here to here sorta-thing’.”

This allowed the family to “actively assist with their own rescue,” according to Henderson.

Brian Owens, a three-year veteran of Charlotte County Search and Rescue, participated in the search effort for a family left stranded in the remote wilderness outside Utopia after their utility terrain vehicle broke down late Monday night. The family was discovered at around 4 a.m. the next morning.

Brian Owens, a three-year veteran of Charlotte County’s unit, said this detail alone made the midnight operation unique because it gave rescuers a rough idea of the family’s location right off the bat.

“It was a combination of police being able to ping the cell phone tower and us being able to communicate with the subjects themselves,” he said.

While the actual searching may have been straight-forward, navigating the terrain proved to be the real challenge. In the early hours of Tuesday morning, a makeshift convoy of three vehicles had formed.

While Woodside’s jeep led the way, an RCMP pick-up truck and another search and rescue member’s SUV followed behind her.

The rescuers turned off the main route onto an ice-covered logging road in darkness.

“For once, it wasn’t raining,” said Owens of the convoy’s journey into the rugged back country. Equipped with a head-lamp and wielding a flashlight, he recalled the temperature was hovering between minus 10 to 15 degrees.

Eventually, the convoy switched course yet again and continued their hunt on an uneven forest trail. While Woodside’s jeep conquered the pathway’s packed snow, ice and slush with ease, the two other vehicles were not so lucky and quickly became stuck.

Two RCMP officers and another search and rescue member piled into

Woodside's vehicle as the convoy - now reduced to a single vehicle - plowed forward.

The family was finally found a short time later, roughly five hours after the initial call for help. All walked away from the ordeal unscathed.

The child, in particular Woodside said, was a "real trooper, very brave and tough."

"We did an initial check to make sure they were alright and had heat packs, extra mittens and hats with us but they were well prepared and properly dressed," she said.

"It was a good ending."

When reached by the Telegraph-Journal Wednesday, the family declined to comment.

On Wednesday morning, Henderson stressed that individuals who plan to trek into the great outdoors should always prepare beforehand.

"Obviously, make sure others know where you are going, bring a means of communicating with people, food, water, and medical supplies," he said. "Be able to sustain yourself and be an active part of your own rescue should an emergency situation arise."