

TRAVEL, TRUE CRIME Andrew Fiouzi / 5 hours ago



THE VANISHED SOULS OF AMERICAN NATIONAL PARKS

Stir-crazy after months of lockdowns and restrictions, more people seem to be heading into the wilderness – and few are prepared for what they find there

On October 9th, University of Washington anthropology professor Sam Dubal began his hike in the **Mowich Lake** area of **Mount Rainier National Park**, an active volcano in the Pacific Northwest. Known as Mother Mountain loop, the 17-mile trail ascends from 2,000 to 5,000 feet and is colored with cascading waterfalls, boulders coated in moss and views of eternity that make the moderately trafficked but difficult terrain feel worth the risk.

The **weather** that day was 47 degrees and partly cloudy. During the summer months, this part of Mount Rainier National Park is vitalized by consistent rainfall, and the climate and vegetation resemble that of a temperate rainforest. But on that brisk October day, a series of winter storms had blanketed parts of the dense forest landscape in snow. Multiple reports suggest that Dubal had a backcountry permit to spend the night at Carbon River Camp. But Dubal, a skilled hiker who had just a few weeks prior scaled a far more treacherous mountain, never made it there.

The following day, on October 10th, a storm washed out the crossing Dubal would have used to traverse the Carbon River on his way to the campground. Two days later, on October 12th, Dubal's family reported him missing. The call to National Park Services quickly **made headlines**, but something strange was happening in the country's national parks, and as it would soon transpire, Dubal's case wasn't unique: In fact, he became the subject of a record-breaking 60th search-and-rescue mission on the mountain just this year alone.

THE RISE IN DISAPPEARANCES

"Rainier is just eating people this year," says Jon Billman, author of *The Cold Vanish: Seeking the Missing in North America's Wildlands*, who's been investigating "missing persons in wild places" since the 1990s. "Those cases are all so disparate that I don't know that there's a pattern other than it's just a weird mountain."

The **other recent cases** Billman is referring to include that of Vincent Dije, 25, who disappeared on June 19th; Talal Sabbagh, 27, who disappeared on June 22nd; and Matthew Bunker, 28, who was reported missing on June 25th along the base of Liberty Ridge. The statistics, too, are "weird" this summer, reiterates Billman: "It's just been non-stop." In fact, Billman tells me he can't remember the last season where there was no downtime between missing people. "A couple of the missing people were mountaineering and doing some stuff that would be dangerous, but the others were just out enjoying themselves on highly trafficked trails," says Billman. "Rainier has weird cases like that where people are just out enjoying the day and they don't come back."

To be clear, disappearing in the wild, particularly on Mount Rainier, isn't a new phenomenon, but as Billman again notes, this year has been particularly cursed. In part, the surge in the number of missing people in the wilderness, according to Michael Neiger, lead investigator of Michigan Backcountry Search and Rescue (**MibSAR**), has to do with the **COVID-19 pandemic**. "People have been locked-down for so long with nothing to do, and so, they're turning to the great outdoors for relief," he says.

Jenny, a representative of the National Park Services, confirms as much, telling me that though they won't have a final count on the **number of visitors** until the end of the year, she suspects that it's higher than in years past due to the nature of the pandemic. "I

don't have numbers to provide, but what we tend to see historically is when you see years with more people visiting parks or doing activities that maybe they haven't done before, we do tend to see more incidents that prompt some kind of search and rescue," she says. "And that might range from someone who has never traversed a snowfield to someone who goes into the backcountry of a park on a camping trip for a day or multiple nights and might get lost. Weather in parks can change quickly."

But COVID isn't the only explanation for why so many people have gone missing on public lands in recent years, according to Neiger, who suggests that, "the widespread availability of navigational apps for smartphones, which gives people a false sense of confidence when venturing outdoors, especially in more remote areas," has helped percolate this particularly eerie moment in missing people.

Steve Rollins, a rescue leader with Portland Mountain Rescue, tells me that he is also finding himself talking more about how technology has altered human behavior in a way that often leaves people stranded. "We talk about risk homeostasis – the theory says that each of us has our own individual level of acceptable risk," says Rollins. "But of course if you introduce a new technology that makes people feel like a given situation is safer than it actually is, the homeostasis is altered."

In simpler terms, having a phone or a GPS navigator is an effective tool, but it also provides outdoor enthusiasts with a false sense of confidence. "The example that I often use is, if you drive up to the mountain in the wintertime to go skiing, all the car accidents you see are generally four-wheel drives," says Rollins. "Why? Because people with two-wheel drive tend to drive really slow, and we've probably all witnessed the guy in the four-wheel drive flying 50 miles an hour down the freeway past everybody else and then they end up wrapped around a telephone pole or off a cliff or something like that."

Rollins goes on to tell me about an incident 14 years ago during a big mission that made international headlines on Mount Hood. "There was a public outcry after we weren't able to save these three climbers, about why the climbers weren't mandated to carry beacons," he says. So the next three big search-and-rescue missions Rollins and his team were a part of on **Mount Hood** included climbers who knowingly climbed into

winter storms but with “locators.” “That’s a good example where the technology didn’t reduce risk,” says Rollins. “It arguably *increased* risk because those people probably wouldn’t have climbed into a storm without those locators, but they were under the impression that, ‘Well, these things are so great, I can take these risks and if I get over my head, rescuers can come running.’”

THE MANY FACETS OF A SEARCH-AND-RESCUE OPERATION

In the case of Dubal, according to a [CNN](#) report, “for the first nine days, a group that included park rangers, volunteer hikers and helicopter crews from the National Park Service and U.S. Air Force searched for Dubal on the ground and by air.” But storms on subsequent days limited the abilities of on-the-ground rescuers.

It was at that point that Dubal’s family [started a petition](#), pleading that rescue teams continue searching for him aggressively for at least 72 more hours. “There is a very high chance that Sam is alive,” family members noted in the petition. “With a high level of fitness and experience and gear including tent, sleeping bag, raincoat and more, there is a reasonable chance that he is currently surviving.”

After receiving 50,799 signatures, the National Parks Service announced that their team had resumed the search for Dubal – due to the publicity creating such a stir, they had little choice in the matter. “It’s the family pressure on these government agencies that keeps the search going or opens up the search to other resources,” says Billman. Which is to say that this type of dedication to locate a missing person is hardly the norm.

“Unfortunately, the search-and-rescue procedures in the U.S. vary a great deal by state,” says Laurence Gonzales, author of [Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why](#). For example, Gonzales says, if you have to get lost, you’re much better off getting lost on the West Coast than on the East Coast. “This is because of the way they run search and rescue in Oregon versus New York State,” he says. In New York State, explains Gonzales, the state police are in charge of search and rescue and they get paid overtime for it. “So they pile on and get anybody who wants to work overtime,” he says. “It’s just not professional, and they don’t do a very good job of it.”

Out West, however, there tend to be very organized, well-trained and dedicated

search-and-rescue people, who are activated when someone is lost or when there's an accident. One of those people is Rollins. "At least for our team, we have very highly experienced search and rescuers that are very competent, well-rounded mountaineers, and a lot of our guys have been doing this for 10, 20, even 30 years," he tells me. "We expect you to be very comfortable climbing glaciated peaks, crevasse rescue, avalanche rescue, zero visibility, navigation, being out in blizzards."

But again, according to Billman, the adept search-and-rescue experience of the Portland Mountain Rescue crew is more the exception than the rule. "Let's say you go missing in Vale, Colorado – you might be okay because there's a lot of money in that county and they put a lot of resources into their search and rescue," he says. "But you go missing in, oh, just pick a county on the New Mexico/Colorado border where there is very little money and that's a different story." Most people (and their families), then, are at the mercy of where they go missing. "It's a gamble," says Billman. "It's Russian roulette. Hopefully, you go missing in a well-funded professional county or a **national park** that prioritizes missing persons."

Dubal's case is a particularly interesting example: On the one hand, the search was effectively shut down after just a few days due to a storm, and was only reopened because of the aforementioned petition. On the other, there's no denying that the National Park Services in Washington State invested a vast number of resources in their efforts to find Dubal. Still, according to Neiger (who tells me that he got into the business of search and rescue because he "enjoys working directly for families, helping them when no one else will"), most search-and-rescue (SAR) teams are tied directly to a governmental entity. As such, they "take their marching orders from either a bureaucrat or a politician, who sometimes don't base their decisions on what is in the best interest of the victim, or his or her family's search for answers to their disappearance or murder," he says.

According to Neiger, state agencies are sometimes very hostile to such efforts, and refuse to share basic information about the case, even information they've shared with the news media. "It's astounding the roadblocks they throw up, even on decade-old cases," he says. "I was really surprised to see the amount of competition, ill will and backbiting that goes on between some SAR teams – especially certain K9 teams – as

well as between many law enforcement agencies." A lot of teams and agencies, Neiger says, are very territorial and try to keep everything in house. "They steadfastly refuse to bring other skilled, nationally certified SAR assets in their immediate area to bear on the search for a missing person, or share any information about the search effort, even months or years after they've given up on the search and closed the case."

Billman sees it as an "ego problem" – "they want to solve their own issues," he says of National Park Services. "They don't want a lot of outside resources having to come into their boundaries and into their sovereign jurisdiction to help with these things." The other part is that they want to protect the park experience for the visitors that are there. "They don't want a bunch of dogs running wild and drones flying overhead, which are against regulations," Billman adds. "And you could argue all day – are these good reasons or not good reasons?"

Rollins, however – who does stipulate that his experience conducting SARs missions in national parks is mostly limited to Mount Rainier and Crater Lake – tells me that the reason for the red tape isn't nearly as aggressive as Billman and Neiger seem to suggest. "There have been deaths on Mount Rainier for volunteer rescuers," says Rollins. "So the Park Service is rightfully concerned." In addition, though Rollins understands why friends and family members of the missing occasionally seek outside help with SAR missions, in his experience, disparate teams, even those with good intentions, cause more problems than they provide solutions, "because they created tracks that we no longer knew if we were on the hunt for the right person," says Rollins. "Not to mention, if they get lost or injured, we have to divert resources."

THE SASQUATCH CONNECTION

Rollins' team, like most officially sanctioned search-and-rescue operations, only works on a case from anywhere between three to 12 days. "Some of that is weather dependent," says Billman. After that, the "active" search comes to an end. That, says Billman, is when some families may become desperate enough to get in touch with the Bigfoot researchers: "It's a **Bigfoot** country, right?" says Billman. "Washington State, the Olympic Peninsula."

The most prominent of these researchers is Dan Paulides. In [Billman's article](#) on the

subject of missing people, he notes that Paulides – who has spent has spent hundreds of hours writing letters and Freedom of Information Act requests in an attempt to break through National Park Service red tape – has identified 59 clusters of people missing on federal wildlands in the U.S. and southern Canada. “To qualify as a cluster, there must be at least four cases; according to his pins, you want to watch your step in Yosemite, Crater Lake, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon and Rocky Mountain National Parks,” reports Billman. Paulides, according to the same article, believes that the “Park Service in particular knows exactly how many people are missing **but won’t release the information** for fear that the sheer numbers – and the ways in which people went missing – would shock the public so badly that visitor numbers would go down.”

“You have to respect [the Bigfoot researchers],” says Billman. “We’re talking about putting on a pack and busting up these ridge tops and hiking these rivers.” Not only do these researchers get involved in the search, they also open up their homes to the grieving families. “They just open up any resource and say, ‘Whatever you need.’” According to Billman, these researchers stage searches from their homes, many of which are the closest piece of private property to the search areas. “These half-dozen-or-so researchers spend all of their free time in the mountains searching for missing kids,” says Billman. “And I’m telling you, nobody knows those mountains better than these people because of their **Bigfoot** research.”

In fact, according to Billman’s same article, it’s “aficionados of the vanished” like Paulides who currently hold the most current and up-to-date count of the number of missing people – at least 1,600. Following two weeks of extensive search and rescue operations by the National Park Service, Dubal, Billman thinks, likely remains on Paulides’ list, even though according to official records, he is now presumed dead.

Only time will tell if someone like Neiger or Paulides finds Dubal’s case worthy of another look. For Neiger, it’s unlikely, since he usually works on long-term missing cases and cold-case murders involving clandestine activities or burials. “I usually need long-term, 24/7 access to a search area, which means I look for cases involving parcels that are open to the public, such as local, county, state, federal or provincial lands and waterways,” he says.

Either way, with yet another lockdown looming, it's not hard to see how the current missing persons numbers are primed to increase, which means more search-and-rescue operations and more questions as to where people are vanishing to.

"Sometimes it's very obvious because the terrain is very bad," says Rollins. "But there's times where you're just like, 'I don't get it.' Those are the spooky ones."



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