

Three hikers prompt two searches within two days

By Camden Easterling, Enterprise Staff Writer

For the second time this week, Park County rescue workers organized a search for — and eventually found — three Colorado men in the backcountry near Cooke City.

Park County Search & Rescue workers and the Park County Sheriff's Office Wednesday morning found all three men unharmed after one of them activated an emergency satellite messaging system when two of the group did not return to their Lower Aero Lake camp. When rescue workers left the men Wednesday, the group's plan was for the two of them who eventually made it to camp to hike back to their vehicle, which was at the trailhead. The third member of their party was waiting at the trailhead.

But Thursday morning, authorities learned one man wasn't at the trailhead, Lt. Tom Totland said Friday.

This week, Steven Aker, 20, and Adam Smith, 30, and James Lundstrom, 19, of Loveland, Colo., were camping at the lake. They planned to wake up very early Tuesday to hike to Granite Peak, Totland said. Lundstrom didn't feel well, so he stayed behind. Aker and Smith didn't return to camp by the time they'd planned, and Lundstrom eventually activated a SPOT device around 2 a.m. Wednesday.

A SPOT device is a GPS unit that allows users to transmit their geographical coordinates to alert emergency responders that they need help.

Rescue workers and Yellowstone National Park rangers, whose efforts included using a park helicopter, on Wednesday located all three uninjured. While Lundstrom was hiking out to Cooke City to report Aker and Smith missing, they had returned to camp to find Lundstrom gone, Totland said. Aker and Smith split up to look for Lundstrom.

Rescue workers eventually found all three in various locations. They dropped Aker off at the trailhead, where the men's vehicle was parked and instructed him to wait for Smith and Lundstrom. Smith and Lundstrom headed back to camp and had told officials they would pack up their gear, then hike to meet Aker at the trailhead and at some point would check in with Park County officials, Totland said.

But when authorities on Thursday morning hadn't heard from them, the Sheriff's Office started a second search mission, Totland said. U.S. Forest Service workers found Aker and Lundstrom at the trailhead, where there is no cellular service, Totland said. The men told searchers that Smith had yet to make it out of the backcountry.

At some point as Smith and Lundstrom were hiking out from camp to meet Aker at the trailhead, the men split up because Smith was falling behind, Totland said.

USFS workers took Aker and Lundstrom to a Forest Service cabin in the area while searchers looked for Smith. A helicopter later spotted Smith driving away from the trailhead. Rescue workers landed the helicopter and spoke with Smith, who was uninjured, Totland said.

Smith eventually connected with Aker and Lundstrom and the three were headed to Cody, Wyo., Thursday night before returning to Colorado, Totland said.

The three have outdoor experience and at least one has considerable backcountry experience, according to family members the Sheriff's Office spoke with this week, Totland said.