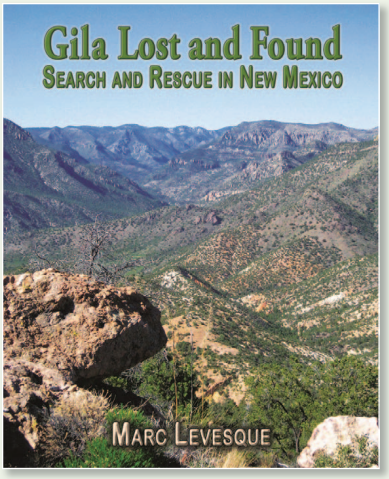
READS

by Christine Steele

Gila Lost and Found:
Search and Rescue in New Mexico



Cover of Marc Levesque's new book, "Gila Lost and Found: Search and Rescue in New Mexico."

Lower right: Marc Levesque in communication during a search and rescue operation.

Upper right corner: The Independent suggests these three newly published outdoor guides for your summer reading list: "Best Wildflower Hikes New Mexico: A Guide to the Area's Greatest Wildflower Hiking Adventures" by Christina Selby; "Best Tent Camping: New Mexico" by Amaris Feland Ketcham; and "Field Guide to the Trees of the Gila Region of New Mexico" by Richard Stephen Felger, James Thomas Verrier, Kelly Kindscher and Xavier Raj Herbst Khera.

If you have ever gone hunting, camping, hiking, backpacking, canoeing, or exploring in search of lost treasure in New Mexico, you might have lost your bearings and had one of those moments when you asked yourself, "Am I in trouble here?"

If luck and weather were on your side, you breathed a sigh of relief and carried on — or backtracked — whatever for which the situation called. In "Gila Lost and Found: Search and Rescue in New Mexico," longtime hiker, climber, outdoor educator and New Mexico Search and Rescue (SAR) volunteer Marc Levesque tells of all manner of rescues — and of the herculean efforts made by the many SAR volunteers who do this lifesaving work for free.

Suicides, double tragedies, animal rescues, and fatal wildlife encounters are just a few of the types of incidents that SAR volunteers encounter on missions.

You will learn what not to do when going into the wilderness — whether it be for a few hours or a few days — like how alcohol, hunting, and hiking in the dark do not mix, and why you should never, ever leave anyone behind. You will learn about the human drive to survive days, even weeks, in weather you would expect to kill you, both heat and below-freezing cold, and three-day blizzards. And you will learn about the mighty efforts SAR undertakes to save people's lives.

You will be amazed and in awe of the number of and different types of resources that go into a search mission — from man to machine to animal. There are ground teams, people on horseback, and K9s. Agencies include federal, state, and local, from the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. National Guard, Border Patrol with their K9s and helicopters, and even the U.S. Air Force, which has brought in helicopters from Arizona to help on a search. There are even agencies you might have never heard of, like the New Mexico Civil Air Patrol.

Often, the public may jump to conclusions or make assumptions about the subject of a search's competence or preparedness. But after reading "Gila Lost and Found" you will discover that even those experienced and well-prepared for a trip into the wilderness can encounter unexpected and unwelcome surprises that can lead to dangerous or even deadly circumstances.

Accidents, injuries, medical conditions and Mother Nature can all add to or create a problem where there wasn't one — as well as lack of knowledge about SAR. Often, subjects of a search don't understand how Search and Rescue works, or the laws regulating motorized use in a wilderness area (life, limb, or eyesight must be at risk) leading to rescue times much longer than they might have anticipated, not considering how long it took them to get to that remote location in the first place, and that it will likely take SAR volunteers longer because they have to prepare and are often going at night.

If a subject finds themself in trouble, they might think a call to 911 — if they are conscious and have cell service — will summon a giant bird to pluck them off their mountaintop. But that involves requesting one from an agency like the National Guard, Border Patrol, or Air Force, all of which takes time, and that is if one is available. That is when you begin to learn why interagency cooperation is so important in rescues.

For tech geeks, Levesque gives you plenty of details — everything from the different types of emergency locating beacons to the components of a SAR mission. There are some humorous tidbits and Marc's dry wit throughout (TL>IQ chapter), while never losing sight of the seriousness and sometimes somber nature of what they do.

You will come away with a new respect — and perhaps a bit of awe — at what goes into a Search and Rescue mission in the Gila region, and a renewed respect for wilderness and wild places — their ruggedness and remoteness offer great beauty but can also kill you. Overall a wonderful read with great storytelling mixed in with important details that can save your life — or the embarrassment of having to be rescued — the next time you venture into the backcountry.

Pick up a copy at O'Keefe's Bookshop in Silver City or Coas Books in Las Cruces, or order via Amazon as part of your essential reading this summer.

Marc Levesque has been an active New Mexico SAR volunteer since 2006, serving in a variety of roles from field team member to senior-level field coordinator. He is currently a certified instructor for the National Association of Search and Rescue and an adjunct faculty member at Western New Mexico University, where he also advises the student SAR team.

1. Why did you decide to write this book?

I wanted to describe how SAR operates in New Mexico and the often-extraordinary efforts required by volunteers to save people in harm's way. New Mexico has a statewide search and rescue system that is managed and performed by volunteers, making it unique from all other states.

2. What was your most moving/ memorable SAR experience?

Being part of a team that saved a woman's life. She and her husband had been lost for three days in the Burro Mountains in early July, and she had refused to drink any water for fear of giardia. After locating her, our team assisted with her evacuation by helicopter. We later learned that she would have died in less than an hour had we not found her

3. What is the one thing people can do if they find themselves lost?

If you can safely retrace your steps to a familiar place and walk yourself out, do so. If not, stay put and hunker down to await a rescue. Two sections in my book provide details on how to stay safe and avoid becoming the subject of a rescue mission.

4. What are you working on now? Tell us a little about that:

I grew up at the dawn of the Space Age and have long been interested in outer space and what it takes to travel and live there. In 2019, I served as commander of an international crew simulating a two-week mission on Mars at the Mars Desert Research Station operated by the Mars Society in Utah. I've been selected to serve as commander for another Mars-simulation mission in 2022 and following that plan to write a book.