

Sweetie spotted at 11'700ft
on Sunday October 1

Sweetie's Rescue

We had to rescue Sweetie, a 7 year-old pregnant llama lost in the Indian Peaks Wilderness on September 13.

We were in Boston for Marv's Prize when a text reached me about a FaceBook posting. Ever since then, my life has been about nothing else than rescuing Sweetie. I immediately recognized the area, I had to act. Frantically my friend Leigh and I searched for the identity of the owners. They were as elusive as Sweetie turned out to be. As it was, they were hunters from Oregon that had come on a hunting trip with their llamas. Barely back from Boston, I recruited my young llama caretakers Diego and Sebastian to join me on a day-trip into the valley on Sunday September 24. It brought no results, even though we scanned the trails for prints and llama droppings, and talked to dozens of hikers and backpackers coming down the mountain that

Sunday afternoon; nobody had spotted her.

My friend Leigh and I were convinced that we had to go in deeper into the valley, and camp back there. Again, I recruited our Landscaper's sons, this time Diego and Rudolfo, and Tuesday September 26 we left for our next adventure, supported by the Mounted Rescue group (on horse) and by Andy who is part of the National Large Animal Rescue Organization. After three days and two nights we called off the search, Sweetie stayed elusive. Our moods were at a low.

Then Monday a text came in from Oregon. Sweetie had been sighted October 1 at 11'700 feet, way high above the valley where we camped. A picture was attached, yes - it was a white llama, it was Sweetie!

No time to waste, we started to put together the next rescue mission. Neither Leigh nor I had ever camped at that altitude in October, where the temperatures dip way below freezing, and to top it all, far away from any trails! This is the time to relax on a beach in Hawaii, not to backpack in the Rocky's! We bought, borrowed, exchanged warm cloths, my boys Sebastian and Diego had to be outfitted, we needed to carry enough food for this expedition, and we needed support. Before we left, we had a great team together: The owners Matt and Cody were planning to fly in Friday after work, and hike to our camp in the dark. Saturday Andy from Animal Rescue, and a group of Flyathletes, people that love to run and fish, planned to come up for the day to help capture Sweetie. And then there was the home team, our husbands and friends who had our backs. But how would anybody find us? Yes - the satellite device!

We knew we had to leave the trail and bush-whack to treeline, somehow! Our hunter friends from Oregon, Matt and Cody, suggested a camp spot and a route to get there. Friday we were supposed to go up. But thick fog greeted us in the morning. With such low visibility it was too dangerous to leave the trail, and we had to wait until noon before it was safe to go up. The route was way steeper than it appeared on the satellite image. Fallen trees made it impossible to pick a straight line, the stream we were supposed to follow consisted of three streams, lots of swampy areas, and steep cliffs. Carrying big packs did not help, and the llamas were loaded with paneers that required lots of space. The trees became impassible, we tried to follow one of the creeks. Leigh had already fallen twice, Santano, her llama had fallen, then in a steep narrow section next to a cliff, Monica and Pedro (two of my three llamas) both fell. We had to take Pedro's paneers off, since he would not get back up.

Somehow, we all got through the crux and unloaded the llamas on a rock-outcropping. Leigh urged me 'we have to camp, it's getting dark!' But there was no water, and we needed water. Diego and I ventured ahead, and like a miracle a meadow appeared with one of our streams meandering through it. We had a camp spot, and we were close to treeline. As soon as we got everyone up to our camp, I needed to let our support team know that we had not reached the agreed camp spot. I pulled out my satellite device and shared our coordinates with everyone down in the lowlands, especially with Matt and Cody who had little cell phone time between landing at DIA and driving into the mountains. Now we could only hope that they would find us! Exhausted, we set up camp. Sebastian and Diego were life-savers, as they prepared all the water we needed. We cooked our dinner, thankful that all were not injured and wondering what the next day would bring. Would our helpers find us, would we find Sweety, and how the hell would we ever get down again. Matt and Cody sent a message that they were on their way. That was promising. I decided to send out another message, telling the ground-crew that we did not know how to return, that the path up was too dangerous for a descent with packs and llamas. A encouraging message came through that they were already studying the satellite maps for a way down for us. After hanging a lantern in the meadow to be as visible as possible in the dark, we all collapsed in our tents.

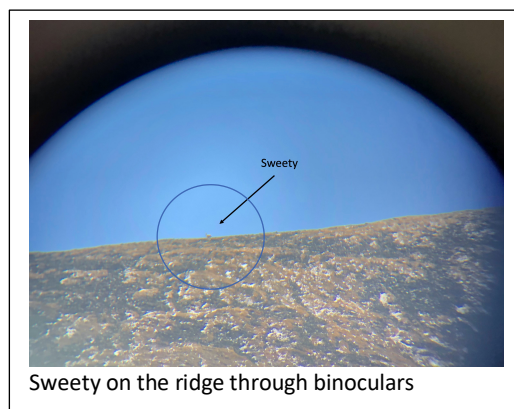
It was 12.30 at night when I awoke, I heard voices outside the tent, Matt and Cody had found us! What a relief!

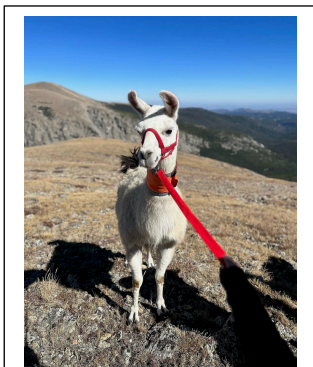
The next morning, as we were cooking our breakfast (meaning adding hot water to freeze-dried food), Matt and Cody exploded in joy - they had spotted Sweety. In fact, I could see her by naked eye! We quickly ate our meals and came up with a plan. Leigh and I were too tired to climb up another 2000 feet in altitude, Pedro was absolutely exhausted. It was up to Sebastian and Diego to follow the hunters, with Monica and Lucy, my two young llamas who just got their first taste of camping this summer. Since llamas are heard animals, having llamas as part of the capture team was crucial.

While they soon disappeared from sight, we cleaned up camp and strategically positioned ourselves with a cup of coffee, and scanned the distant mountain with binoculars. Then the radio message came in 'no sight of Sweety'. They decided to climb all the way up to the 12'000+ foot ridge to get a better view. No luck! Where was this girl? They descended the steep mountain side back down and set up the llamas in a well-visible area around 11'000 ft - it was Sweety's turn to find them.

Around that time the three llamas that remained in camp with us, became restless and stared up the hillside to our south. It's either a moose or our Saturday support team was arriving. It was the later; happiness is being found!

Two of the runners, Emy (Leigh's daughter) and Kristine Hoffman (a surgeon from Denver) had already continued up towards the 12'700 ft peak, the rest positioned themselves around us with binoculars. Then Sebastian came in over the radio, they had spotted Sweety on the very top of the ridge, and sure enough there she was, a tiny silhouette against the blue sky. Really Sweety, could you make this any more difficult!



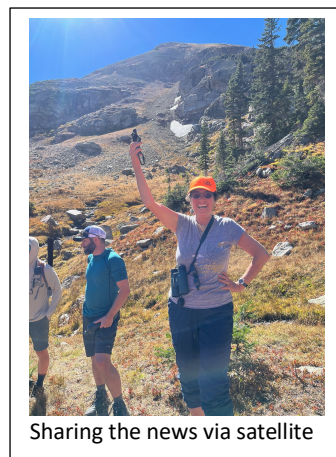


Sweety after her capture at 12'000 ft

Now Andy took over the command. From our vantage point we could see everybody, while Matt & Cody could not even see Sweety. Andy directed the different groups to different areas in order to pressure Sweety to come our way, and the direction of the llamas, and preventing her from descending into the next valley. She was clearly aware of all the commotion, watching all the action without taking a step. Sebastian and Diego needed to bring the llamas back up, first part way to give Sweety a chance to come down to them, then all the way up since she was not budging. Matt and Cody were already back on the ridge. They were within 40 feet of her, but she was not interested in being captured and disappeared behind

the ridge, where Emy and Kristine were positioned to block her way. Since the sound of the radio was irritating her, the last command was to not use the radio anymore, move very slowly, and bring the llamas closer to her. We could not see anybody any more, the radio was silent, we were holding our breath, waiting. After an eternity, a sound came through the radio - they got her!

Here is what they told us: Sweety started walking, then running full gallop towards the llamas, ignoring Matt as she ran right by him, heading for Monica and Lucy. In the middle of snorting and nose touching, Sebastian tried to catch her, she got away, but then immediately turned back for more snorting and nose-touching (with the llamas). Sebastian launched himself at her, engaging in



Sharing the news via satellite

the first rodeo of his life. Little did she know that he works out at the gym every day, he was not letting her get away. Somehow Diego managed to get in there and clip a rope to her halter, and voilà, she was captured. The joy and relief on the mountain and in camp was beyond words. I immediately pulled out my satellite device to relay the news to the distant valley (mainly our husbands). After a long descent they appeared above camp, Matt in the lead with Sweety, who walked behind him as if it were the most natural thing to do. Yes - she was very happy to be part of a little llama herd, and in the care of people. She was rescued!



Walking down into camp with Matt&Sweety in the lead, followed by Diego&Monica, Sebastian and Lucy, and Cody and Emy. Sweety's Ridge is in the far distance.



The essential capture team: Sebastian, Diego, Monica and Lucy



Leigh and Fiona with Sweetie

The next challenge was how to get off the mountain. Down in Boulder the home team had been busy studying maps and satellite images and relayed a possible route for the descent. Those Flyathletes that had remained at camp with us, eagerly swarmed out to explore proposed routes, coming back to report cliffs, downed trees and other obstacles, but one option looked promising. While the runners left

camp to return to the trailhead that same day, the rest of the us rested at camp, happy and relieved. The next day, Sunday morning, Matt and Cody, Leigh, Andy, Sebastian, Diego and I left with our now six llamas. Cody walked slightly ahead, exploring the route down. Stopping for moose, climbing around cliffs, we carefully found our way back towards the end of the valley, and after a treacherous final descent, landed on the trail. Time for the satellite device again: we made it down, and our home team needed to be relieved of their worries.



Searching for a way down



Leigh and Andy descending with Santana and Tomichi

Today a snowstorm is raging in the mountains. Sweety is resting happily at our place, with her new llama friends, maybe looking towards the distant mountains, oblivious to the fact that up there is Sweety's ridge, the place she spent 24 days of her life.



Sweety's Rescue Team:

Front: Emy, Leigh, Diego, Sebastian, Fiona, Cody, Matt

Behind: Fly athletes, Andy from Animal Rescue is in the back between Fiona and Cody

Missing: Kristine Hoffman, and our Home Team Kelly, Marv, Jenny, Bob and JoLee