

**LOCAL NEWS**

# **Boulder volunteers rescue pregnant llama after she was lost for 24 days**

Boulder residents organize rescue for llama lost in Indian Peaks Wilderness



Sebastian Salas, left, and twin brother, Diego, helped rescue Sweetie the llama, left. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

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After a 7-year-old pregnant llama named Sweety got lost in the Indian Peaks Wilderness on Sept. 13, a group of Boulder residents decided to take action and rescue her.

Without knowing who the llama belonged to, Fiona Caruthers and Leigh DiNatale felt like they had to do something after they saw a Facebook post about it. They both recognized the place where Sweety went missing.

“I just felt like I know this place, and there may be nobody else that knows where it is except the people that camp there,” Caruthers said. “I’ve got to go.”

As a llama owner herself, Caruthers said she felt such a strong call to help that she had no other choice.

“It was really our feeling that if we don’t do anything, this llama is going to die up there in the winter,” Caruthers said.

Sweety is owned by two hunters from Oregon who came to Colorado for a 15-day trip. While in the Indian Peaks Wilderness, they left their llamas behind for a short time. Two of their llamas were still there when they returned, but Sweety had managed to escape, despite being securely staked in place.

Co-owner Matt Munther said they spent the next day trying to find her and posted signs at all nearby trailheads.

They reached out to law enforcement and Colorado Parks and Wildlife, while notifying everyone they could that she was missing.

“We were seeing tons of recreationalists out there ... everyone was seeing our signs but no one was seeing our llama,” Munther said.

Sweety is also pregnant, which added another element of urgency, Munther said. They remained in Colorado for another eight or nine days after having lost her, before they had to head back to Oregon.

### Three rescue attempts

Shortly after Caruthers learned about the missing llama, she brought her own llamas and their caretakers, Diego and Sebastian Salas, on a day-trip on Sept. 24 into the valley where Sweety had gone missing.

Since llamas are herd animals, Caruthers hoped her llamas would attract Sweety. They scanned the trails for prints and droppings and talked to dozens of hikers and backpackers coming down the mountain that Sunday afternoon. They found and heard nothing.

On Sept. 26, Caruthers and DiNatale decided they needed to camp and search deeper into the valley. This time, the group was joined by the Mounted Rescue Group that searched for signs of Sweety on horseback, and by Animal Rescue Volunteer Andy Petrick from the Southwest Llama Rescue Group.

After three days and two nights, they called off the search.

Caruthers said they left empty-handed and unsure about what to do next, until a hiker spotted Sweety on Oct. 1 at 11,700 feet elevation above where the group had camped.



Sweety, left, with llamas Lucy and Monica at home of Fiona Caruthers, who raises llamas and is holding Sweety until she can get back to her owners in Oregon. (Cliff Grassmick/Staff Photographer)

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On Oct. 5, Caruthers, DiNatale, Diego and Sebastian Salas and their llamas began to hike on a second overnight search. They faced thick fog, steep terrain, fallen trees, steep cliffs and more, that made their off-trail journey up the mountain incredibly difficult.

During the first overnight rescue, Petrick said, the group hiked seven miles in. On the second rescue, they hiked in 10 miles.

When they reached a spot to camp for the night on Oct. 6, Caruthers sent Sweety's owners the coordinates and left a light to signal their position. The llama's owners flew in from Oregon Friday night, hiked in the dark and were able to find the group.

The next morning, the group was overjoyed when they spotted Sweety on the ridge. Caruthers, DiNatale and the older llamas stayed behind, due to exhaustion. Sweety's owners, Diego and Sebastian Salas and the young llamas ascended the mountain to find Sweety.

Petrick and a team of flyathletes, people who enjoy running and fishing, arrived later that morning. Petrick used radios to position people strategically to stop Sweety from going over the ridge and encourage her to come toward them.

"It was super stressful when we located her and couldn't get close to her," Munther said.

Eventually, Sweety wandered close enough to run past her owners toward the group of llamas that had gone up the mountain. Sebastian Salas was able to grab her around the neck and wrestle her down, while Sweety tried to shake him off. Diego Salas was able to slip in and clipped her to her harness. Sweety was caught on Oct. 7.

"When we caught her, I was just shaking," Diego Salas said. "It was crazy ... I was so relieved."

## **Deep ending**

Munther said there was "a crazy sense of relief" once they got their hands on Sweety. When they got her down to camp, there was a lot of cheering and hooting and hollering, he said.

Caruthers said once Sweety was captured, her whole demeanor changed and she went from a wild animal to being well behaved, sweet and happy to be led down the mountain. She said everyone wanted to pet Sweety and give her a hug.

Diego Salas said he didn't know Sweety was pregnant until he got up the mountain.

"We actually saved two llamas," he said. "It feels great because we all did our part and it all worked out."

Petrick said most of the llama rescues he conducts are large groups due to them being herd animals, and that it was unusual that Sweety was lost alone. He went into the rescue with eyes open, knowing it would be a challenge.

"You always go in with hope and you hope that you can make something happen. For this one, everything lined up just right," Petrick said, adding, "We had a fairly large group of people committed to making this happen and it was people who hadn't known each other weeks before ... the effort they put in to coordinate and get people out there was impressive. And I think it is an incredible reflection of the dedication people have for animals."

Munther said it was remarkable how many people were trying to help and how much money, time and effort they spent to find Sweety, without ever being asked to do so.

"This is a moment that we could contribute," Caruthers said. "There's so many things in life that you look at and maybe say 'I wish I could help,' but you have neither the skills or the knowledge. And with this, we felt like we could do something."

Munther said it's inspiring to see people take on something to help others without being asked.

"Leigh and Fiona went so above and beyond what you could ever ask of anybody you'd never met," Munther said. "It certainly motivates you to pay it forward, whatever that looks like in the future."

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