

89-year-old woman survives night in woods after getting lost

By John Curran, Associated Press Writer

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WILLIAMSTOWN, Vt. --An 89-year-old woman survived a night alone in the woods after wandering away from her campground cabin, emerging dirty, a little confused and missing a hearing aid, but otherwise safe.

"She's an old Vermonter, and she's tough," said her granddaughter, Kim Cardona, 45, of Exeter, N.H. "I knew she'd pull through."

Mary Sweet, of Sunapee, N.H., who suffers from dementia, was visiting Limehurst Lake Campground with friends from her church Monday when she left their cabin to walk to a park bench next to the lake.

Sweet, who suffers from dementia, disappeared about 3:30 p.m. and was reported missing two hours later, according to Sgt. John Flannigan, a spokesman for the Vermont State Police.

More than two dozen Vermont State Police officers, game wardens and campground staff searched for Sweet in the densely-wooded hills that surround the camp, to no avail. Search dogs scoured the woods overnight, and a Vermont National Guard helicopter searched from the air starting Tuesday morning, to no avail.

Sweet, formerly of Windsor, is a hiking buff who scaled Mount Ascutney last year. Described by one relative as "stubborn," she lived alone up until last December and was a gardener into her 80s who used to do her own roof repairs, according to Cardona.

She was wearing a turtleneck, two sweaters and corduroy pants when she was last seen, but ate nothing and endured temperatures that dipped into the mid-30s overnight.

But she seemed no worse for the wear by 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, when a man helping in the search stumbled upon Sweet on a hillside, about 300 yards from the pond.

The area had been searched before, according to Flannigan, who said Sweet was apparently wandering through part of the night and early morning.

Sweet was alert and unharmed, lying on the ground, propped on one elbow, picking ferns. She didn't know about the search, but quickly found out as Jeremy Hedges, 28, waved to a hovering search helicopter.

"It got to the point where I kept going out to a clearing and waving my shirt at the helicopter," said Hedges, who found her. "I'd come back and she kept telling me, 'I wish I had orange shoes, so you could put that on a stick and wave it, 'cause they could see you better.'"

She waved off medical attention in the woods and didn't want to get on a gurney brought in by an ambulance crew. She walked out, escorted by troopers. "Nice to see you," she said to a photographer, smiling.

"I lost my hearing aid," she said, as she was led to the waiting ambulance. "I got one in, but this one, I lost," she said, motioning to her right ear.

"We'll get you a new one," granddaughter Susanne French told her, holding one arm.

"Well, it's \$1,000. I haven't got \$1,000," Sweet replied.

She was taken to a hospital to be examined.

"We do believe that if she did spend another night out here, it could have been a different story," said Flannigan.

"Prayers are answered, that's all I can say," said Maggie Dexter, co-owner of the campground.