

Missing hiker camped, waited out foul weather
Searchers find Samuel Black after fog lifts
By Nicole Fitzgerald
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Samuel Black pitched his tent on a ridge near Brandywine Mountain seven days ago so he could wake up to a spectacular mountain panorama.

As he sat back to enjoy the unspoiled views that weeks of hot, sunny weather have brought to the Whistler area this summer, the steadily accumulating clouds didn't fully register in his mind.

"It was like a view from a jet plane," Black recounted. "You look out and you are the only person out there. You see all of these peaks and you are left with this feeling of complete exhilaration. I guess I got a little carried away in that."

When he unzipped his tent the next morning, he stepped into dense fog that prevented him from finding his way off the mountain, and ultimately triggered the multi-day search-and-rescue effort.

At 9:15 a.m. Thursday, after days of stormy weather, skies cleared and Whistler Search and Rescue in a helicopter located the 39-year-old Vancouver resident on the northwest side of Brandywine Glacier, about 18 kilometres southwest of Whistler.

Black was cold, tired and hungry, but had suffered no serious injuries. He was mostly concerned about the worry his parents and girlfriend suffered in his absence.

"I feel really bad about worrying everyone," the assistant philosophy professor at Simon Fraser University said as he talked to his parents in Montreal after the ordeal.

"I just went out thinking, 'it's a nice day' and I went beyond the trail and got socked in and couldn't get out. I am just so embarrassed."

But rescuers said he did well.

"He did everything he should have," said Whistler RCMP Const. Michelle Nisbet. "The only suggestion in the whole situation that I could make is not to go out hiking by yourself."

Black had notified a friend about his hiking plans and when he didn't return to Vancouver at the pre-arranged time of 6 p.m. Saturday, Whistler Search and Rescue was notified the following day and the search immediately launched.

With visibility on the ground at only three to seven metres during several days of bad weather, searchers were ineffective. After four days, the resources of the Whistler Search and Rescue were depleted and teams from Surrey, the North Shore, Lion's Bay, Central Fraser Valley and Coquitlam were called in.

Although he was clothing only in a t-shirt, shorts and jacket at 2,200 metres, with temperatures below freezing in the evenings, Black knew he would survive. With 20 years of experience, he knew to hunker down in one spot, making it easier for rescue crews to find him.

He sat tight and waited for the weather to clear. About 10 a.m. each morning, there was a slight opening in the fog and he would search for a way out, but his attempts were futile. It was a long six days. He tightly rationed his food stock of a few power bars, bagels and a can of tuna. The sound of helicopters searching for him fuelled his determination to survive.

“The search and rescue people made all the difference,” he said. “It kept me going, hearing those choppers.”

Several times, he thought he had been spotted.

“I thought a lot about how much pain I was causing my friends and family and my girlfriend and her family,” he said. “The worst part of it was knowing people were worrying about me.”

His girlfriend and hiking partner Laura Crema was relieved to have him back. She waited out the rescue in Whistler, trying to distract herself with shopping and restaurants. She bought Black a new jacket. She described the colour as “rescue red.”