

Search & rescue volunteer Sallee a human GPS

And now he can add Larry Peabody Award winner to his résumé.

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By Marek Warszawski / The Fresno Bee

Art Sallee is a lost hiker's or hunter's best friend.

When someone goes missing in the mountains, whether it be in the Kaiser Wilderness above Huntington Lake or the Panoche Hills in west Fresno County, Sallee always seems to know where to search.

It's a skill the noted tracking expert has honed during more than 20 years as a tireless volunteer for the Fresno County Sheriff's Search & Rescue Mountaineering Team.

"People always leave signs, whether it's footprints, dirt deposits on a rock, scuffed branches or even discoloration," Sallee said. "You just have to know what to look for."

While the 81-year-old retiree no longer pounds the trails like he used to, he's still an invaluable search-and-rescue resource.

Sallee founded the Pacific Mantracking Association and offers regular seminars that attract law enforcement officers from throughout California. He's a local coordinator of the "Hug-a-Tree and Survive" program, which teaches school kids what to do in case they get lost. He also organizes the High Trails Reunion, an annual camping trip for disabled persons to Voyager Rock at Courtright Reservoir.

With that résumé, it's no surprise Sallee was named this year's recipient of the Larry Peabody Award, given annually by the California Office of Emergency Services to an exemplary search-and-rescue volunteer.

"Art is 100% dedicated to search and rescue and 100% dedicated to helping people," said Sgt. Kathy Curtice of the Fresno County Sheriff's Department. "He's an invaluable resource and such a humble, humble person."

Sallee received the award during a Sept. 11 ceremony at Treasure Island from Matt Sharper, the statewide search and rescue coordinator for the California Emergency Services Management Agency.

Sharper said Sallee's nomination stood out.

"When we got it, there was no doubt Art was going to be this year's recipient," Sharper said. "The guy is amazing."

Although Sallee has assisted in dozens of successful missions since joining the Fresno County Sheriff's Search & Rescue Mountaineering Team in 1987 -- the unit averages 10 to 12 calls per year -- it's the unsuccessful ones that tend to stick out.

Take the 2008 search for Caruthers deer hunter Robert Willis, who never returned from a hunting trip to the Exchequer Meadow area near Dinkey Creek.

Despite the efforts of more than 30 searchers, on foot, horseback and helicopter, no trace of Willis (besides his pickup) has ever been found.

Still, that hasn't prevented Sallee and some of his fellow volunteers from returning to the search area and searching for fresh clues.

"If you don't find them the first time, there's an obligation to go back and look some more," Sallee said.

Fall can be a busy time for search and rescue volunteers as hikers and hunters often venture into the backcountry unprepared for the changing weather.

Sallee has simple advice for anyone who gets lost in the wilderness: Find a nearby clearing that's visible from the air and make yourself as conspicuous as possible by wearing bright clothes, making an "X" on the ground with dirt, rocks or logs, flashing a mirror or lighting a signal fire.

He also says that GPS devices work well for self-rescues -- if you learn how to use them.

"A lot of people buy those things and the only thing they learn is how to find their own location," Sallee said. "But if you know how to plot waypoints, they're really useful."