



SAMPSON is carried in a Glasgow Volunteer Fire Department stokes basket as he is rescued from a steep ravine last Tuesday morning. He had been missing for 19 hours until he was found by his owner, Galen Lemmon. (photo by Galen Lemmon)

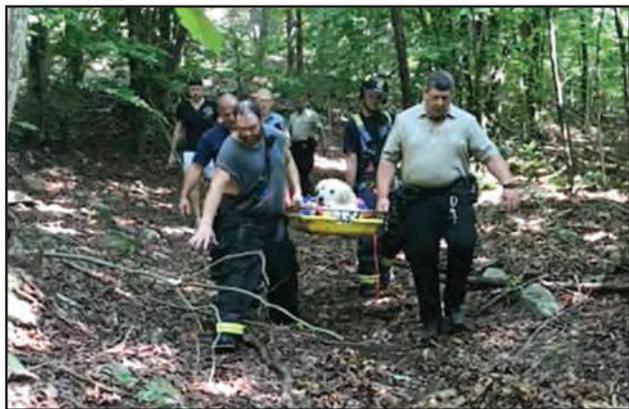
Saving Sampson

Long Search, Rescue Effort Pays Off

BY EMMA COLEMAN

Last week, a storm scared a 14-year-old dog with weak hips and poor eyesight into 1,200 acres of woods on Sallings Mountain near Glasgow. Nineteen hours later, he was rescued from a stream at the bottom of a steep ravine, where he had been wedged between rocks and battered by heavy rains.

The dog, Sampson, was found by his owner, Galen Lemmon, of Glasgow, the



RESCUERS carry Sampson out the woods. The Glasgow Volunteer Fire Department and the Rockbridge County Sheriff's Office responded to the call. (photo courtesy of the Glasgow Volunteer Fire Department)

morning of July 27. The Glasgow Volunteer Fire Department and the Rockbridge

County Sheriff's Office responded to Lemmon's call

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for help and lifted the dog out of the ravine. Sampson was uninjured, to his owner's relief and disbelief.

"In so many scenarios, he would have been dead," Lemmon said. "And he's alive and doing fine."

Sampson, or "the polar bear of Sallings Mountain," as Lemmon's grandchildren call him, weighs about 85 pounds.

"We've been told the dogs that size usually live about seven to eight years. So, right away you know that he's kind of on borrowed time," Lemmon said. "But he's been so healthy and so well. It was just within the last year that his hips began to really give way, and also his hearing and his sight."

Lemmon said Sampson's energy and mobility have decreased in the last year.

"He won't even go from the house to the garage, which is slightly uphill, and he'll just stay here on the patio," Lemmon said. "So, the fact that he takes off is just crazy."

The 73-year-old dog owner said he was watering his garden the afternoon of Monday, July 26, when Sampson was spooked by some thunder and ran into the woods.

Lemmon had left the dog sitting on the patio. "He's not going anywhere," he thought.

"I heard a clap of thunder and I just didn't think about it," Lemmon said. "And I kept watering, heard another clap of thunder. And then I said, 'I better get up, the sky is getting dark.' And as soon as I came up on the deck and came around to the patio, I said, 'Oh no, Sampson's gone.'"

As rain began to fall, Lemmon jumped into his Dodge Ramcharger and began the search for Sampson.

"When he really makes up his mind to take a little walk, he will go up the mountain a little ways," Lemmon said. "So, I went as far as he would have dared gone up the mountain, because he does like to go uphill."

Then Lemmon checked what he called a "shortcut road" for hunters that lease the mountain. As he drove through the woods, the sky opened and heavy rains drenched the property.

"I kept my windows down, trying to look, in case he'd gone down that shortcut road," Lemmon said. "And I never saw him."

The dog owner came back out of the woods, hopped in his Caravan and took the trip down the mountain to notify his neighbors. Then he returned to the woods and continued his search.

Lemmon stopped by an old quarry on the edge of his property to look for the dog. Stones for a hotel built in Glasgow in the early 1900s had been quarried there, creating steep cliffs in the woods and a hazard to missing Sampson.

"With his sight getting like it is, being disoriented, and he's very scared of thunder, and then that deluge of rain, I knew that he could have fallen off the edge of that quarry," Lemmon said. "It might be a 20-, 25-foot drop and the overall length of the quarry might be 200 feet long. And I know if he'd gone over there, you know, he was dead. So I looked over there, climbed here and there to trying to get a full view along the ground."

But Sampson was nowhere to be seen, and Lemmon left to check the fields at Stonewall Paintball for the dog.

"I went to every fort, every building, every shelter he could have possibly taken up in during the storm," Lemmon said. "Couldn't find him."

Then the dog owner drove through the streets of Glasgow again, searching for the dog and asking passersby if they had seen the Great Pyranees.

"I went to every street, multiple times, the only hope is that I would see him under an arch light by then, because I knew he would be exhausted, and he would be lying down somewhere," Lemmon said. "When he was younger, if he would get loose, he loves to visit Glasgow. And Glasgow, it may be a tiny town, but when you're looking for a dog, it's got a lot of streets."

Lemmon gave up the search and went home at about 10:30 p.m. Monday. Sampson had been missing for about seven hours.

"I was praying the whole time, 'Lord, help me.' And He was probably saying, 'Shut up, boy, I heard you the first time,'" Lemmon said.

The dog owner said his concern for Sampson made for a bad night of sleep.



RESCUERS FACED a steep incline when they rescued Sampson last week in Glasgow. They used a stokes basket to transport the dog to safety after he had been found by his owner. (photo courtesy of the Glasgow Volunteer Fire Department)

"We have coyotes on the mountain. We got rid of them for a while, but they were back just within the last month. We've heard them. It's not one or two. It's a bunch of them," Lemmon said. "And we knew that with his sight and his weak hips, he wouldn't stand a chance. So, I didn't sleep too well"

Lemmon resumed his search for Sampson at 7 Tuesday morning. He drove back through the woods again, walked to some nearby railroad tracks, and came up empty handed.

Then he returned to the area of the woods near the quarry, not far from where he had searched for the dog the day before. And Lemmon found Sampson at about 10:15 a.m., 19 hours after he had disappeared.

"I said, 'I'm going to walk another couple 100 feet. I'm this far, I ought to walk a little further.' I was looking up to my left. It's a very rocky, steep slope," Lemmon said. "And I was also looking down into the ravine where the stream is, and around a little bit of a curve, and I said, 'I'm going to quit here,' and I leaned over, looked back, and there was that ball of white fur down in the stream."

Sampson, who was trapped under some rocks at the bottom of the ravine, wasn't moving. Lemmon quickly called his wife, Joyce, and his neighbor, Clint Wimer, for help. Then he called 911.

"With Sampson's weight, I can barely get him out of a car. He wiggles a lot, and it's hard to get him in the car to take him to the vet, so I knew I needed help," Lemmon said.

Once Lemmon hung up the phone, he slid down the embankment to join his dog in the ravine.

"I was hollering as I slid down the bank to get to him. And finally, when I got near him, he moved. So I told Joyce, 'He's alive,'" Lemmon said. "He was glad to see me. Not enthusiastic, but definitely alive."

Joyce and Wimer arrived about 10 minutes later. Wimer slid down the embankment into the ravine to join Lemmon, and the pair began pulling rocks off of the dog's body.

"My neighbor said, 'I can move this big rock,' the one that was to his back and in his spine," Lemmon said. "So he moved that one first. Then I moved the big one that was in more toward his stomach and his hind legs. And it was, 'Alright, here's another one. Here's another one. Here's another one.' He just kept moving them, and he was able to lie flatter. And then we begin to pull rocks out from underneath him."

Once Sampson's body was free from the rocks, Lemmon and Wimer moved him across the small stream onto some blankets that Joyce had carried to the ravine.

"We made the path, and sure enough, when we picked him up, he got an adrenaline rush, and it was like trying to move an 80-pound fish that was trying to fight you," Lemmon said. "He flattened me in the stream. Thank goodness I didn't hit any of those rocks we had moved. And I just did a lunge like a football player trying to get the ball across the goal line. And I got him on to the blanket, just barely."

Then the Glasgow Volunteer Fire Department showed up, Lemmon said. The department had received the call for help at about 10:42 a.m. Seven volunteers responded immediately.

Chief John Hill was the first the make contact with Lemmon and Sampson. He said he wasn't aware of Sampson's age and condition until he got to the ravine.

"That kind of made it urgent a little bit because of the dog's age and how long he had been missing," Hill said.

The chief and his crew set up a lowering system and lowered a rescue litter, a basket or stretcher often used by first responders to transport those who may be injured, down the embankment to the bottom of the ravine.

"We placed Sampson in it, and lashed him in with webbing," Hill said. "It's the same steps that we use for a human, if we're rescuing them. After he was secure, we just put a haul system in the same lowering system and hauled him up the embankment."

"As they began to bring him up, about halfway up, he tried to struggle and get out," Lemmon said. "He got his head up through some of the lacing, but the rest of him was secure."

"Once back up to the top, we carried him out of the woods in the stokes basket," Hill said.

"When those six guys carried that litter, they looked like pallbearers on steroids," Lemmon said. "Going down that road bed there are rocks. There were a couple fallen tree limbs. They were trucking it out of there."

Hill said in a post on the fire department's Facebook page the day after the rescue that the department felt it was their duty to go to such extremes for Sampson.

"Those of you with pets understand that they are most of the time as close to us our children and are treated as part of the family," he said. "Your volunteers work hard to keep your community safe by protecting life and property. With that said, life is every life, because all lives matter."

Lemmon, who spent five years as a member of the volunteer fire department in Craigsville, called Sampson's rescuers "amazing."

"Their coordination was excellent. Everything the chief told them to do, they did it rapidly. And every command he gave, it was just like one unit operating. It was really cool," Lemmon said. "It was clear they were well trained. And I thought they worked so well together. It was really, really impressive."

It's not every day that a dog requires rescuing, but Hill said it's not rare either.

"We've rescued several dogs over the years," he said. "We'd rather help in that situation, versus that something happened to the owner while trying to do it themselves. And then we'd have two victims."

Sgt. Terry Martin and Deputy Eric Higgins, an animal control officer, from the Rockbridge County Sheriff's Office also responded to the incident and helped haul and carry Sampson.

"They both contributed to the rescue. And they didn't have to," Hill said. "But they did."

The volunteers carried Sampson to an access road off of Wert Faulkner Highway, where Wimer's truck was waiting. The dog was loaded into the back seat of the vehicle and taken directly to the Animal Clinic of Rockbridge.

"They said, within 10 minutes he was up, greeting everybody, wagging his tail," Lemmon said. "He had no broken ribs. His hips were okay. His temperature was normal. It was just amazing. Absolutely amazing."

The clinic observed Sampson through the afternoon. He received food, water, antibiotics and pain medication.

Lemmon picked Sampson up from the clinic at about 4:30 p.m. and took him home, where Lemmon said he is "doing great."

"As old as he is, and as fragile as he is, and as far as he fell and spent all those hours on those rocks, it's just incredible he's still okay," Lemmon said.

Lemmon looks forward to Sampson's 15th birthday in December.