

MAX, THE MULE, MISSING IN NEW MEXICO

By Tom Bryant

Max is missing. The big, beautiful, stocking-legged sorrel john mule pulled away from his owner, Jon Cook of Las Cruces, New Mexico, last November while on a hunting trip and vanished without a trace in the vast Gila Wilderness in the southwestern corner of the state. Jon and wife Jeanine have no children and say that inanimate things are not important to them; their horses and their mules are their babies and losing Max is like losing a member of the family.

Jon and Tim, a goat packer and hunting partner had packed about five miles into a remote area of the wilderness about half way between the Mimbers River and Wall Lake. They set up camp and got down to business

Tim, still hunting by a water hole and Jon, with Max, beating the bushes. After two days of this Jon got lucky and collected a deer; tied it across the riding saddle on Max and happy as a fat pig sleeping in the sunshine, commenced walking, leading Max back to camp.

It was about noon when they came to the dirt tank where Tim was hunting, only Tim wasn't hunting and was nowhere to be seen. Not seeing Tim right away Jon called his name but not very loudly. No Tim. Jon took Max down to the tank to let him drink and said everything was going good. Max was relaxed, but alert. The deer was riding well. It was a beautiful day to be out in the wilderness; enjoying the peace and quiet with your favorite riding partner and favorite hunting partner. Jon headed back to camp, leading Max, when all hell broke loose.

In the warm sun, Tim had fallen asleep not far from the trail in full camo, Max either caught wind of Tim, or saw some movement, either way the wreck was on. Max began to pull back; Jon began to caution, "NO MAX," which woke Tim and he suddenly appeared out of the bush apparently appearing to Max at least, like a greenish-brown bear. And the big, beautiful mule's survival instincts kicked in and he decided right then and there to quit the country. Jon later reports: "Max ripped the rope out of my bare hands, the deer flipped over the saddle, Max dragged



John and "Max"

it for a while until the pack rope broke and then free of me and his load, Max went galloping down the trail."

Jon said he figured Max would head for the trailhead where the trucks and trailer were parked so he took off in hot pursuit of the run-away mule. Max was in full-bore linear panic and as his tracks indicated, ran right by the vehicles and disappeared. By the time Jon reached the trailhead, it was obvious that his mule was gone missing. "I went up and down the road," he said "Checked it for hoof prints but never found any. I checked fence lines and openings in the fence but never found anything. We had seen other hunting camps near the road and I checked, but

Max was nowhere to be found."

Jon had told Tim that if he didn't catch Max that evening, he'd probably stay at the trailhead. Only problem was, he didn't have his truck keys with him, therefore he had to overnight in the horse trailer and it was what you'd call a pretty primitive camp. "Thank God, I had left some things in the front of the trailer," Jon said. "Two old saddle pads, an old army blanket and a canvas horse sheet. I had taken off my long underwear in the heat of the day and stuffed them in the saddlebags on Max. And of course he was gone now, with the saddle, the saddle bags and my long johns." Nights in November are twelve cold hours long. Jon put one pad under

him and one above with the blanket and sheet over that but still got cold that night and it snowed. Luckily he'd left five gallons of water in the trailer. He said he don't know what he'd have done without that.

Jon said he didn't sleep much that night, he was sick to his stomach about the devastating turn of events. He said he prayed a lot and when he finally saw that streak of pink in the morning he headed back to camp. Tim had packed the four goats and they loaded the buggers up and hiked back to the trucks, Jon packing the panniers that should have been on Max. They stayed two more days and nights, searching on foot and by vehicle for any sign of the missing mule, but found none. Jon said the worst part of the whole deal, was having to call and tell the tale to Jeanine once they got to where the cell phone would work. He said she broke up pretty badly.

Jon and Jeanine are very religious people and state that their faith help get them through these troubled times. "A lot of people go through an awful lot more than just losing a mule," Jon said. "Their health, family troubles, whatever, there are lots who suffer tremendously. In comparison, this is nothing. If Job could not only lose his family but his livestock and 500 donkeys, surely my loss is nothing." Yet, while he silently suffers, Jon is very proactive in spreading the word about his missing mule.

"I met with all the ranchers up where I lost Max," he said. "I met with the sheriff, the livestock inspector, Forest Rangers and area outfitters. I contacted livestock inspectors in Arizona, Colorado and Texas. I've taken out ads in horse trader magazines. I went back to the Gila twice in the two weeks after that fatal hunting trip. I probably hiked over 45 miles to every water tank within walking distance of the road, up and down Black Canyon, Tom Moore Canyon and a few others. I made one more trip in January, riding Sally, my little mustang mare. But mostly now I'm just waiting. Waiting, hoping and praying."

According to Deputy Director, New Mexico Livestock Board, Bobby Pierce, the average time for finding a missing equine is about two weeks. That's little comfort to Jon Cook whose mule has been missing for six months. Jon says his gut feeling is that unscrupulous individuals may be involved. So if you happened

to hear of someone suddenly and questionably, coming in procession of a big, beautiful, stocking-legged, sorrel john mule, or if you or anyone you know of, while riding in the Gila Wilderness of New Mexico and come upon Max, please notify Jon Cook: 575-635-5537, that would really make his day.