

A TRUE SAR STORY—MISSING ELEPHANT IN THE CATSKILLS

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In mid-October 1957, a two-ton 13 year old female elephant named Siam escaped into the Catskill Mountains from a farm in Mitchell Hollow (Windham, NY) where she was being boarded and trained for the Hamid-Morton Circus. Twelve exhausting days later, she was captured, but only after she essentially surrendered, tired, hungry and sick from bitter cold and her meandering.

According to New York Times articles, the story began Wednesday night, October 16th, when Siam refused to leave an open field to return to the farm owned by Mr. & Mrs. Alfred Vidbel, her trainers. She was apparently frightened by a horse and fled into the woods.

Searches were hampered by disorganization, rough terrain and bitter cold, including numerous snow showers throughout the period. Aerial searches proved effective when possible, though searchers complained that a large gray elephant looked very much like many of the large gray boulders strewn across the Catskill Mountains. Ground parties, many comprised of untrained locals just seeking to help, spent days hiking through the area chasing the wayward Siam. Even children, on school break due to an influenza epidemic, participated in the daily searches. Groups of unarmed local hunters were joined by local and state police and rangers, as well as a big game hunter, Hal Hennessy, who had previously hunted elephants in both India and Africa.

One of the first sightings of Siam came on the evening of October 22nd when Virgil Phinney, a tractor salesman from Freeport and pilot, spotted the elephant from the air at approximately 6:30pm, lying beside a stone wall. However, darkness closed in before the ground parties were able to arrive at the site.

In the air again the next morning, Phinney reported spotting the elephant at about 10am and dropped a roll of paper to mark its position. But within minutes, Siam was reported a mile away, lumbering along on long strides.

By her sixth day of freedom, hunters and Siam's trainer indicated she was starting to show signs of fatigue. "Her trunk is dragging, and she's breathing hard," one hunter commented. Siam continued to play hard to get, even when searchers resorted to a public address system playing a recording of bull elephant mating calls in an attempt to draw her out of the woods.

On October 26th, the 10th day of the search, it was reported that John J. Fromer, a lawyer from Tannersville and director of the Green County Civil Air Patrol had "enlisted the aid of volunteer ground units and established air-to-ground short wave radio communications." The article also noted that Fromer had flown aerial searches for the elephant over "snow capped ridges."

Fresh tracks were spotted by hunters on the afternoon of the 26th, but no physical sighting of Siam was made. The trackers believed that the elephant had crossed into Schoharie County, climbing over Mount Pisgah and into flatter countryside to the east. Fresh tracks were again spotted by hunters in the afternoon of the 27th, but low clouds and snow flurries prevented aerial searches, frustrating searchers.

On the morning of the 28th, Siam was spotted near Tyler Road at the foot of East Windham Mountain. Searchers on the ground converged on the site and twice were able to corner the elephant before she broke away.

Aerial searches located her again near Sunside a little later. Again, she was cornered but then broke away for a few more minutes of freedom. Siam finally gave up her wanderings early in the afternoon of the 28th, nearly fifteen miles from her home, and after twelve days of traipsing across the northern Catskill Mountains. She allowed herself to be taken by a trainer to a trailer out on the road containing two other elephants and loaded aboard. One of her trainers indicated that Siam appeared to have a heavy cold and had lost weight.

Over the next couple of weeks, Siam recovered, reportedly taking rum mixed into her food and water to help alleviate her chills. By early November, she was back at work training.

Sources:

Numerous articles from the New York Times covered this story from October 22-November 4, 1957. In addition, there was apparently a Life Magazine photo-essay from November 11, 1957 about Siam's journey—a copy is still being sought.