



David Pitkin

June 1, 1960 - January 17, 2010

Two federal wildlife managers doing an aerial survey of migratory waterfowl died when their small plane went down west of Philomath Sunday afternoon. Search teams found the wreckage Monday morning. Both the pilot and a passenger were found dead at the scene.

The pilot, Ray Bentley, 52, of Blodgett, was a longtime employee of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. His passenger, David Pitkin, 49, of Bandon, was a former employee working as a contractor for the agency.

The two men were involved in the annual midwinter count of migratory birds, said David Patte, a spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They were on their way back to Corvallis after surveying duck and goose populations in coastal estuaries.

“You couldn’t meet two finer people,” Patte said. “They were really dedicated to the work they did. They loved the migratory bird program.”

Patte said this was the first fatal crash in the history of the program, which has been using aircraft to track bird migrations in the United States since the 1930s.

The plane, a single-engine Cessna registered to the U.S. Department of the Interior, disappeared Sunday afternoon on a flight from Newport to Corvallis. Benton County Sheriff Diana Simpson said the aircraft left Newport about 4 p.m. Sunday after a day of surveying, but it never reached the destination indicated in its flight plan.

“They took off from Newport but never arrived in Corvallis,” Simpson said

Monday morning.

There were high-wind warnings at the coast Sunday evening, but the two men reportedly had reasonably good weather for their short flight over the Coast Range.

“When they left it was raining slightly, but the heavy winds hadn’t started yet,” said Terry Durham, a service technician at the Newport Municipal Airport.

“There was a pretty high (cloud) ceiling.”

The effort to find the missing aircraft began about 8 p.m. Sunday, when the Benton County Sheriff’s Office dispatched deputies and search teams.

About 50 people, including members of Corvallis Mountain Rescue, Marys Peak Search & Rescue and the Amateur Radio Emergency Service, assisted in the search.

The Civil Air Patrol sent up an airplane Sunday evening, but it had to return due to bad weather.

At about 2 a.m. Monday, a REACH helicopter took off to retrace the flight path of the missing aircraft. The helicopter pilot picked up a radio signal from the plane’s locator beacon and narrowed the crash site to an area west of Philomath.

Ground searchers were able to use the information to locate the wreckage at about 8:30 a.m.

“It’s a heavily forested area, not easy to get to,” said Mary King, emergency program manager for Benton County.