Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum firefighters rescue trapped deer in Black River

FORT DRUM, N.Y. (Feb. 4, 2020) -- Fort Drum firefighters rescued a whitetail deer stranded in the icy Black River waters, adjacent to Range 8 on Feb. 1.

Personnel from Fire Station 2 and 3 responded to a call placed by a community member that afternoon, and they arrived at the scene after a risk assessment was made for a potential one-attempt rescue.

Firefighters Jeff Hambsch and Jordan Saber navigated through the slushy ice to reach the deer on an inflatable raft, or Quick Rescue Device (QRD). As the frightened animal drew further away, Hambsch went into the water to break up the ice and made their approach.

“I was probably three or four feet away from the deer when it got spooked and actually lunged in our direction,” Hambsch said. “It couldn’t go any further in the direction it was going, so it just turned in the path it had already cleared.”

That’s when Hambsch was able to wrangle the deer so Saber could secure it with a rope.

“It was hard to get a hold of it, but I was basically able to get almost a headlock on it,” Hambsch said. “We got the rope on it, and the guys hauled it back in.”

The crew assembled on land got the deer off the ice and removed the rope. Assistant Chief of Operations Matthew Woodward, Fort Drum Fire and Emergency Services Division, said the deer looked petrified but seemingly unharmed. He noted that they saw coyote tracks on site and that the deer apparently fell into the ice trying to flee.

“I hunt deer, and I’ve never seen a deer with eyes that big in my life,” he said. “It probably laid there for a good minute. Then it got up, headed toward Range 9 – about 30 or 40 yards – and shook the water off it.”

Hambsch said that he never performed an animal rescue before and that this was the closest he’s ever been to a deer.

“I’m from Long Island, a city boy,” he said. “I’m more about the beach than the woods, or fishing in the ocean instead of a lake or river.”

That’s what Woodward found to be most curious. With a fire crew mostly of avid outdoor recreationalists – hunters who stock their freezers with venison – it was Hambsch who volunteered to rescue a deer.

“If it was a human rescue, no question he would be there, we all would,” Woodward said. “So, I was quite surprised that he volunteered to get in the suit and go out in the water after a deer.”

Hambsch said that they train on ice rescues, so this was a chance to put that certification to the test.

“Honestly, when is there going to be another opportunity like this?” he said. “It was interesting, and I wanted to see what it would be like.”

Coincidentally, Fort Drum FES personnel recently completed their required cycle of ice rescue training just over a week ago.

“We actually just did two separate days of training down at Remington Pond on ice, within the last two weeks,” Woodward said. “Technical rescue is one of their missions, so these guys stay up on their training.”

Woodward hadn’t heard that another fire crew, in St. Lawrence County, had recovered a horse from the St. Regis River just a day after their own rescue.

“I imagine that’s a little bit heavier to drag out than a deer,” he said. “But this was a big deer – it wasn’t a fawn or yearling – it was a mature deer. When it got up and ran off on its own, it looked strong, not wobbly or anything. I don’t know what it’s doing now, but it was a good save for us.”

Assisting in the rescue were Lt. Jeremy O’Neill, Timothy Newman, Jeff Hambsch and Jordan Saber, all from Fire Station 2; and Lt. Scott Sanford, Jason Melby, Corey Dorchester and Steven Casey, from Fire Station 3. Also on the scene was Pfc. Robert Wenk, game warden from 16th Military Police Brigade.

“Overall it was a successful mission, and the guys did a great job,” Woodward said. “I wouldn’t have expected any less from them, to be honest.”

For further information regarding this release contact Fort Drum Public Affairs at 315-772-5463 or Valerie.m.schneider2.civ@mail.mil.

CAPTION: Firefighters Jeff Hambsch and Jordan Saber, from Fort Drum Fire Station 2, attempt to reach a deer trapped in the Black River, adjacent to Range 8, during an ice rescue Feb. 1. (Fort Drum Fire and Emergency Services Photo)