

Hunters Find Crash Site of Missing An-2 (Video)

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A pair of hunters from the Sverdlovsk region has found the crash site of an An-2 biplane that went missing in the Urals almost a year ago with 13 people on board.

The Antonov aircraft was last seen taking off without authorization from an air strip near the town of Serov on June 11. Investigators believe the pilot was taking a group of locals on a spontaneous fishing trip or excursion to a banya when it disappeared.

Rescuers called off the search for the lost craft in November after scouring several hundred thousand square kilometers by air, but teams of volunteers had kept up their own searches on foot.

On Sunday, the Izvestia daily published photographs and an account of an expedition to the An-2 crash site, which is located roughly 8 kilometers from the Serov air field in marshy, wooded terrain.

According to the Izvestia report, the shell of the An-2 was found among a dozen flattened trees, its wings detached from the burned-out fuselage and metal coating seared off. Of the passengers, who included two senior traffic police officials from Serov, all that remained was a heap of bones.

Efforts to locate the missing An-2 have been consistently dogged by false leads, and the official search operation has been opened and closed on a number of occasions.

Relatives of the crash victims were first led astray when emergency workers took a large patch of oil on a reservoir near Serov to be the An-2's likely crash site. A subsequent trawl of the reservoir found nothing.

A man thought to be a survivor of the crash then emerged from woodland near Serov in July, but he turned out to be a former convict who had lost touch with his relatives. A radio hobbyist's claims that he had picked up distress signals from the missing craft on his mobile phone also yielded no new clues.

On Saturday, however, a pair of hunters contacted journalists out of the blue and asked them to join them on a foray into the forest to test suspicions that they had seen fragments of the missing craft in the taiga surrounding Serov.

The hunters, both Serov residents, told Izvestia that they did not immediately contact authorities in case their suspicions led to another fruitless rescue operation.

After inspecting the scene of the crash themselves, police confirmed that the hunters had found the lost An-2 and said they had seen the bones of 11 people in the debris. Aviation officials said the tail numbers on the crashed plane matched their records for the missing An-2, which was stationed in Serov to monitor forest fires.

Dmitry Skryabin, a journalist with the Serov Rabochy newspaper and brother of one of the hunters, said in an interview posted on YouTube that his brother and a friend first spotted the crash site when searching for new hunting grounds on Friday.

After revisiting the site with journalists on Saturday, Skryabin and his brother then informed local emergency officials about their find on Sunday morning.

But Skryabin stressed that the crash site was difficult to access and that it will be difficult for investigators to carry out tests necessary to pinpoint the causes of the crash and identify all the victims.

The tests could take up to a year, he said, citing a conversation with emergency officials. "One could say that this story has only just begun. Investigators have a lot of work ahead of them," Skryabin said.

As a first step, federal investigators on Sunday reopened a criminal case on charges of causing the death of two or more people by violating flight-safety rules, a criminal offense that carries a maximum punishment of seven years in prison.

Investigators also said they would transport the An-2's wings and shell to a less swampy location, since the marshes around Serov become inaccessible during summertime, and that

the passengers' remains would be sent for DNA testing.

Since news of the crash site's discovery broke, Skryabin said two relatives of passengers on board the Antonov plane had contacted him and expressed relief that the plane had finally been found.

But Anastasia Rogulina, a sister of one of the crash victims, said in an interview with the Serov Globus newspaper that she suspected foul play.

"I believe the plane was dragged to that place and burned. Judging by the video, there aren't even dead trees around it. The area is completely untouched, although everything should have burned," she said.

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