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Investigators locate body

By Ralph Bartholdt

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Jeb and Suzy, the bluetick hounds, rode in the back seat of the pickup Wednesday as it made its way up John Creek Road.

The bulky 4-wheel-drive veered off and followed a logging road past mountains lumped with brush and a few trees.

The winding road climbed and turned muddy before hobbling along a sidehill. It switched back and forth, skirting a knob that overlooked a draw covered with patches of cedar.

Down there, maybe 150 feet, hidden by an old pile of slash, Idaho State Police detectives and forensics officers used hand tools in their careful search for the body of Robert J. Spray, who police said was shot and killed at a nearby residence almost two years ago and buried.

Under a sky of high blue with a few clouds moving breezily Paula McCollum, a Canyon County dog expert, released 9-year-old Jeb, a mottled, lop-eared dog with a deep voice.

The bluetick methodically sniffed and alerted 30 feet up the hill from an area that had been flagged and dug up by investigators.

The hound stopped under a broken snag and confirmed what James Arnold had told police.

Arnold, who is in the Benewah County Jail facing charges of assisting in the concealment of evidence in the shooting death of Spray, told detectives that he didn't have to drag the body, which was wrapped in a blue tarp with a bag of lime, any farther off the road. The slash pile hid it on the south-facing slope under the leaning snag with a stump as a headstone.

Patches of snow shimmered in the shaded areas as investigators carefully cleared away brush and debris, cutting away small logs and lifting dirt.

They uncovered the blue tarp and saw what looked like a T-shirt and a flannel shirt.

"Yesterday the dog was hitting, and we started digging," said ISP investigator Fred Swanson.

He was among seven people including lab specialists, detectives and the dog handler looking for Spray's body along the hillside.

The body was exhumed by 2 p.m. Thursday and the autopsy showed that the man had been shot once in the rib and chest area, said Benewah County Sheriff Robert Kirts.

A bag of lime was among the remains, and shirts, probably those of the father and son, were thrown in the grave.

"There were several other items of clothing that ties people to the problem," the sheriff said.

For his department, the case of Robert J. Spray, who had been one of three missing persons in Benewah County since his disappearance in 2006, is closed.

Benewah County prosecutor Doug Payne said the final confirmation n a matching of dental records n is being conducted in Boise.

So far, statements by James Arnold have concurred with evidence uncovered in the investigation, said Mr. Payne.

"It's completely consistent with what witnesses told us happened," he said. "The cases will probably remain as previously charged."

Joey Arnold, 17, is charged with voluntary manslaughter. He will be prosecuted as a juvenile, Payne said.

Police said Spray was shot through a door as he stood on the porch during an altercation in August 2006 at the Arnold's home less than a mile from where the body was found.

In what they believed was the gravesite, ISP Detective Terry Morgan said his crew began digging downhill from where the body was later located.

"We dug the first one down there," he said. "We didn't find anything."



Ralph Bartholdt - Jeb, a nine-year-old bluetick hound owned by Canyon County dog handler Paula McCollum, is credited for locating the burial site of Robert J. Spray in a remote location near Emida. Idaho police detectives unearthed the remains on the hillside behind McCollum.

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When the dogs arrived, he said it was only a matter of minutes before the site was pinpointed.

"Jeb just went right to the place several times," he said.

Without the dogs, detectives would have cleared the entire area of trees and brush and used probes to locate the body before sifting through surrounding soil to prevent from destroying evidence.

Police used witness statements to piece together a map of the scene, but it wasn't until James Arnold was brought out that detectives got a better picture of where the gravesite was.

"He looked and described things he remembered," the detective said. "We decided we'd better get the dogs up here."

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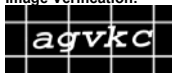
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