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Arizona escapee caught at campground

John McCluskey and his fiancée, who is also his cousin, are arrested after a forest ranger spots them. The two are suspects in the slaying of a couple in New Mexico.

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PHOENIX

After nearly three weeks on the run, an escaped state prison inmate and his fiancée who were targets of an intense nationwide manhunt were captured Thursday at an Arizona campground after an alert forest ranger spotted the suspicious couple, along with their stolen vehicle hidden in the trees.

John McCluskey, 45, and Casslyn Welch, 44, who also is the inmate's cousin, were taken into custody by several law enforcement officers about 7:15 p.m. at a campsite at the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in eastern Arizona. Welch at first wielded a weapon, but dropped it when she saw she was outgunned by a SWAT team, said David Gonzales, U.S. marshal for Arizona.

McCluskey was in a nearby sleeping bag and taken into custody without incident. Other firearms were found at the campsite, and authorities said that McCluskey expressed regret at not having killed the U.S. Forest Service ranger who led to their capture.

"The nightmare is over, but it is still continuing. There's a lot more for law enforcement to do," Gonzales said, referring to investigations into crimes the pair may have committed while on the road, including the possible slaying of a couple in New Mexico.

"We want to tie them to as many crimes as we can," Gonzales said. "We want to ensure that the New Mexico murders are looked at carefully, working with those agencies. And if there are any more crimes that were committed while they were out, we want to make sure we tie those to them."

Said Arizona Corrections Department Director Charles Ryan, "I hope the citizens of Arizona and the nation can rest easier this evening."

Corrections officials have said that Welch helped McCluskey and inmates Tracy Province and Daniel Renwick escape July 30 from a private prison facility near Kingman by cutting through a security fence, setting off a massive multistate search.

Renwick was recaptured in Rifle, Colo., on Aug. 1, and Province was found in Meeteetse, Wyo., on Aug. 9. The last confirmed sighting of McCluskey and Welch -- two of the most wanted fugitives in America -- was on Aug. 6 in Billings, Mont.

Renwick and Province were serving time for murder. McCluskey was serving a 15-year prison term for attempted second-degree murder, aggravated assault and discharge of a firearm.

Province, McCluskey and Welch have been linked to the slayings of Greg and Linda Haas of Tecumseh, Okla., couple whose burned bodies were found in a travel trailer Aug. 4 on a remote ranch near Santa Rosa, N.M. They had been traveling to Colorado on an annual camping trip.

Officials said the stolen car found Thursday at the campsite had New Mexico license plates.

"That's the best news we've had in 10 days. Everybody just broke down and cried for a little bit," Sheila Walker, one of the Haases' best friends, told The Associated Press late Thursday. "That was the one thing we wanted to hear."

The family was grateful that their prayers had been answered and that no one else was hurt during the hunt for the fugitive and his accomplice.

"That was one of our main fears, that they would get desperate and someone else would get hurt," Walker said. "We are just thrilled they are back behind bars."

Gonzales said the relatively quiet arrest of the pair was somewhat surprising and the result of smart work by law enforcement at the scene. All along, authorities feared the fugitives were armed and extremely dangerous, and would not surrender without a fight.

"We were convinced this was going to go down into a bloody shootout," he said. "There was no question about it."

The arrests came hours after officials discussed a report that outlined a series of embarrassing security breakdowns that allowed the escape.

The prison has a badly defective alarm system, a perimeter post was unstaffed, an outside dormitory door had been propped open with a rock and the alarms went off so often that prison personnel often just ignored them, the report said. Also, operational practices often led to a gap of 15 minutes or longer during shift changes along the perimeter fence, Ryan said.

Prison staff told a review team that the dormitory door was left open because of the heavy amount of foot traffic. That open door allowed the three inmates to reach a 10-foot chain-linked fence that hadn't been topped with razor wire. They scaled that fence and hid out for a time behind a building in an area that isn't visible to staff from the yard.

Using the wire cutters, which Welch tossed into the prison yard shortly before the 9 p.m. shift change, the inmates cut a 30-inch by 22-inch hole and held the fence back with a dog leash.