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Search for missing N.C. hiker moving into Georgia

Wife's body found in November; Gary Hilton a suspect in case

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Local, state and federal investigators will venture Thursday into the heavily forested mountains of Union and Towns counties, searching for an elderly North Carolina hiker who may have been a victim of the man charged with killing a 24-year-old Buford woman in the same woods.

John Bankhead, spokesman for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, said searchers on Thursday and Friday would look for John Bryant, 79, who disappeared in October with his 84-year-old wife, Irene.

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Irene Bryant's body was discovered in November, three weeks after the couple vanished. Her husband has not been found.

"Numerous sources have identified Gary Michael Hilton as being in this area of Georgia in late October 2007," Bankhead said

Bankhead said that most of the searchers will focus on Union and Towns counties in North Georgia, but some also would go into eastern Tennessee. The Bryants' ATM card was used in Ducktown, Tenn., after their disappearance.

David Mahoney, sheriff in Transylvania County, N.C., where Irene Bryant's body was found, said investigators from three states — Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee — thought it was logical to return to Towns and Union counties because "Hilton liked that northern Georgia area."

He said the overall search area was much larger, however — from Transylvania County in North Carolina over to Ducktown, Tenn., and to Cherokee County in the northwestern corner of metro Atlanta. A Cherokee County sheriff's deputy, responding to a report of a trespasser on hunting land, talked to Hilton on Oct. 26. The Bryants were last seen Oct. 20.

"The search area is huge," Mahoney said. "We have to make sure we give every effort to find Mr. Bryant's body. We're going to do everything we can to find Mr. Bryant and give that family that part of the closure that they need."

Mahoney said any prosecution of Hilton in North Carolina would be handled by the U.S. attorney's office because Irene Bryant's body was found on federal land, in the Pisgah National Forest.

Suellen Pierce, spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office in Charlotte, declined to comment.

Towns County Sheriff Chris Clinton said some of his deputies would help in the search. Investigators also hoped to complete a timeline of Hilton's movements before he came to the attention of law enforcement officers a few days after Emerson disappeared on New Year's Day.

Hilton has been charged with kidnapping Emerson, who was last seen hiking with her dog near Vogel State Park, and beating her to death and decapitating her.

After securing a promise from a Union County prosecutor that he would not face the death penalty in the case, Hilton took investigators to Emerson's body in Dawson County.

Hilton also is a suspect in the slaying of Cheryl Hodges Dunlap, 46, whose body was found Dec. 15 in Florida's Apalachicola National Forest.

Authorities are seeking possible links between Hilton and other disappearances in an area extending from North Carolina to Florida.

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