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By Tracey Bruce

As of today (Jan. 23), Cedar Hill Fire Protection District firefighters have responded to three calls about people lost in the woods at the new Don Robinson State Park since it opened Jan. 6, Chief Terry Soer said. Jefferson County 911 Dispatch got a call on Jan. 16 about two lost people at the park, and there were two separate calls on Jan. 21, Soer said. He said none of the people were in distress, but the number of calls about people lost has caught his attention.

“I don’t want anyone to misunderstand me. I’m excited about having this great park, but I am concerned about the safety of the people and my personnel,” Soer said. “This is not an urban park where you are surrounded by a city. Once you get out there, you could be out there for some time.”

Soer said, there are cliffs and other land features that could pose real threats after dark. Trails that are visible in the light may be hard to define in the dark, he said.

The park, which takes in 818 acres, is surrounded by additional acreage and conservation areas that span for miles along the LaBarque Creek watershed. Once night falls, light sources are almost nonexistent, Soer said. “It is dark,” he said.

On Jan. 16, two young men called 911 at 6:02 p.m. because they couldn’t find their way back to the parking lot. Because they had a cell phone, 911 was able to determine their location.

“They were on the trail,” Assistant Chief Greg Shuster said. “As soon as crews went in, they were able to make verbal contact.”

Crews were back in service in about an hour’s time. Just before 5 p.m. Saturday (Jan. 21), a 6-year-old child was reported missing but was found before crews entered the woods, Shuster said.

An hour later, at 5:51 p.m., a man who needed help finding his way out of the park called 911. “They were able to ping his location and we were able to send a crew right to him,” Shuster said.

That person also was on the trail, he said.

The park is open from 7 a.m. until a half-hour after sunset. Shuster, who teaches search-and-rescue courses for the state, said afternoon visitors should be aware of the time and conditions.

He said, hikers also should have their phones fully charged before heading down the trail. If there’s a possibility they could be delayed on the trail, visitors need a flashlight and extra batteries.

“If you are going, be prepared,” Shuster said.

Soer said, if people are lost, they should contact authorities and wait for help. “Don’t be moving around. Stay put,” He said the fire district is prepared. “We have quite a contingent of people who are certified in search and rescue,” Soer said.