

'Skeleton in Sneakers': California John Doe finally identified

The remains were found with feet protruding from the ground and sneakers pointing skyward

By [Matt LaFever](#), North Coast Contributing Editor Nov 25, 2024



Warren Hawkins was last seen alive in July 1986 at the age of 21.
Photograph from NamUs

Human remains discovered over a decade ago near the Mendocino-Humboldt County line along Northern California's [Eel River](#) have been identified as belonging to **Warren David Hawkins**, a man last seen in Washington state in July 1986.

The Mendocino County Sheriff's Office announced the breakthrough on Monday after DNA analysis provided a definitive match, ending a mystery that spanned nearly 40 years.

The case, referred to as the "Skeleton in Sneakers" case due to the remains being found with their feet sticking out of the ground and sneakers pointing skyward, began with a chilling discovery on Oct. 29, 2012. According to news website [Redheaded Blackbelt](#), a local family kayaking and mushroom hunting near their home in Piercy, California, uncovered a sneaker partially buried in the ground. Initially dismissing it as trash, they investigated further upon spotting a second sneaker. When one shoe was dislodged, it revealed human foot bones, along with denim pants and a visible leg bone. The family reported the finding to law enforcement, leading Mendocino County sheriff's detectives to the site.



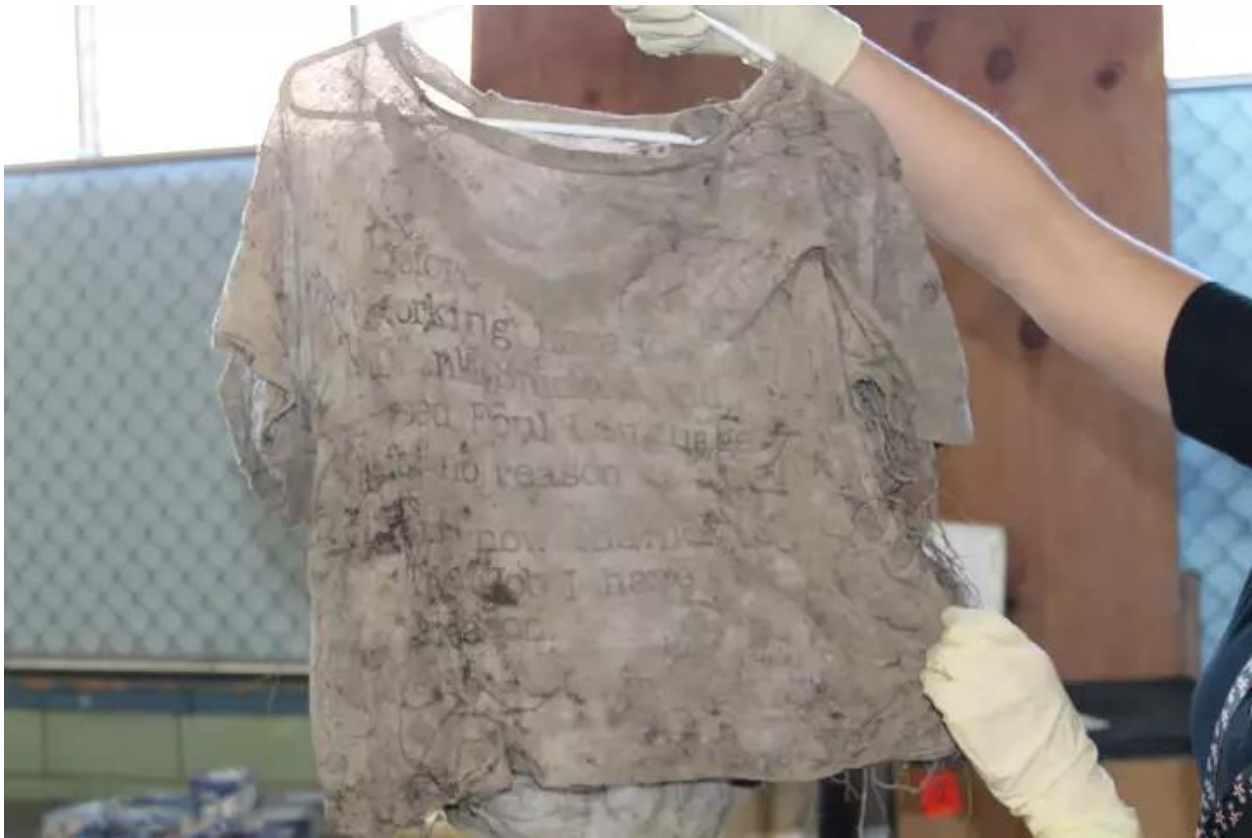
A sneaker and a sock found on Warren Hawkins' body in 2012. Photo taken around the time of discovery.

Photograph from NamUs

Accessing the remote location via kayaks, investigators secured the scene, and forensic anthropologists from Cal State Chico were called in to excavate. The remains, buried in a shallow grave, were missing a skull and showed evidence of long-term burial.

[A news release](#) from the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office detailed the extensive but initially unsuccessful attempts to identify the remains, which were labeled as a "John Doe" homicide due to the circumstances of the burial and evidence of foul play. The style of the clothing found with the remains suggested a connection to the 1980s, but no further leads materialized.

The case advanced in spring 2024, when the sheriff's office submitted forensic evidence to Othram, a Texas laboratory specializing in forensic-grade genome sequencing and genetic genealogy. Othram successfully developed a DNA profile and identified potential family connections for the remains.



The T-shirt Hawkins was wearing when his remains were discovered, which read, "Before I started working here I drank, smoked and used foul language for no reason at all but now thanks to this job I have a reason."

Photograph from NamUs

The DNA profile pointed to Warren David Hawkins, a man reported missing in 1986 by his sister, Paula Hawkins, to the Cowlitz County Sheriff's Office in Washington. Paula Hawkins provided DNA reference samples, including one in 2024 through the Gresham Police Department in Oregon, which confirmed the match.

Records show Hawkins lived in Kelso, Washington. According to information from [The Charley Project](#), Hawkins was last seen July 6, 1986, at the Kelso/Longview Train Depot in Kelso. In 1986, he was 21 years old. Standing between 6 feet, 2 inches and 6 feet, 4 inches, he weighed around 200 pounds and had dark brown hair, brown eyes and a distinctive 4-inch birthmark on his wrist.



One of the sneakers Hawkins was found wearing in 2012 when his remains were discovered in October 2012.

Photograph from NamUs

[According to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System](#), Hawkins' remains were found dressed in white thermal long johns, blue jeans or shorts, a leather belt, and a white "half shirt" bearing a darkly ironic message: "Before I started working here I drank, smoked and used foul language for no reason at all but now thanks to this job I have a reason."

In the months before his disappearance, Hawkins appeared in local news reports. On June 3, 1986, he was charged with resisting arrest. Later that month, he was sentenced to 25 days in jail for second-degree burglary and placed on probation. On July 6, the same day he was last seen, he was charged with third-degree theft.

The Mendocino County Sheriff's Office stated in its news release that Hawkins' mother, now deceased, reportedly dropped him and another unidentified man off at the Kelso train station shortly before his disappearance.



The bottoms Hawkins was found wearing when authorities uncovered his remains in October 2012. Photograph from NamUs

In a striking connection, [the discovery of human remains near the Mendocino-Humboldt County line in 2020](#) added another layer to the mystery of the region. On Oct. 8 of that year, a forester found a human skull southeast of the area where Hawkins' remains were unearthed in 2012. The skull, recovered by detectives, is part of an ongoing investigation.

Capt. Quincy Cromer of the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office told SFGATE, "We do not have any evidence of a connection between the remains recovered in 2012 to the skull located in 2020." He added, "We are unable to get DNA from the skull per our Investigations Commander as the skull was partial."

With Hawkins' remains identified, his family can finally lay him to rest, but the case is an active homicide investigation. The sheriff's office is urging anyone with information about Hawkins' disappearance or the circumstances surrounding his death to come forward.

Anyone with information related to this case is encouraged to contact the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office at 707-463-4086.