

PARTING SHOT FROM JOSHUA BESSEX

A weekly snapshot from The Daily Astorian and Chinook Observer photographers



Crabbing ships are seen near the mouth of the Columbia River on New Year's Day.

ODDITY

When an avalanche hits the slopes, let the dogs out

Speed is crucial in rescues

By SUE MANNING
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Wylee the border collie can search an avalanche the size of a football field in five or 10 minutes. It would take a probe line of 50 people using poles a couple hours to cover the same ground.

When 30 minutes can mean the difference between life and death for a skier lost on a snowy mountain, most people would bank on the dog.

"The fastest thing is a dog — faster than a beacon or echo," said Craig Noble, ski patrol and dog supervisor at Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows resort in Olympic Valley, California. "We respond to a lot of avalanches that don't involve any people. But we don't know that before we leave. We just get there and get the dogs working." Speed is crucial in avalanche rescues, with minimal chances of survival if victims are buried for 30 minutes or more.

Rescue dogs have standards

Noble skis 220 days a year by following the snow from California to Chile and Australia. He also takes yearly classes from the Canadian Avalanche Rescue Dog Association, with trainings at Whistler Mountain in British Columbia among other locations. Noble relays what he learns to the ski patrollers at Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows (the site of the 1960 winter Olympics) and Crested Butte Mountain Resort in Colorado. He's brought all of their dog programs up to the same association standard.

He also teaches classes for students in the mountain communities. "The kids love the dogs," he said.

Every dog and handler must recertify as a team every year, he said, but before handlers get a dog to work with, they train for a year without one.

"It's easier to teach animals than people," Noble explained.

Labradors and golden retrievers — mostly

Wylee is 8, but he's fit and a lean 42 pounds, with plenty of time left in his career, Noble says. Most patrollers use Labradors or golden retrievers, but Noble opted for Wylee partly because he weighs about half what the other breeds weigh. Patrollers have to carry their dogs to search sites in addition to hauling 60-pound backpacks with shovels, probes, headlamps, water and other equipment. The dogs need the lift so they don't get tired before they start working.

Dustin Brown, a ski patroller at Crested Butte, is going on his second year handling Moose, a Labrador retriever. Moose "comes to life in the snow. He feels free. It's playtime. There's a new adventure around every corner," said Brown.

Other employees on the mountain help with training. Some buy clothes at thrift stores and wear them repeatedly so the fabric absorbs a human scent that's used to train the dogs. In the event of a search, there won't be time to get a lost skier's scent, so the dogs are trained generically.

Dogs are not a requirement for ski patrollers, though. In fact, for every dog team there are six patrollers who go it alone at Squaw Alpine. And one critical part of keeping slopes



Matt Palmer/Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows via AP

Dog supervisor Craig Noble put his border collie Wylee through some paces on the mountain in Olympic Valley, Calif. Noble says dogs are better than any beacon or echo, as a good dog can check part of an avalanche grid in five or 10 minutes, the same time it would take 50 people hours to scour the same area.



Chris Segal/Crested Butte Mountain Resort via AP

Ski patrol dogs of Crested Butte Mountain Resort wear antlers, with ski patroller Chris "Buck" Myall dressed as Santa, in Crested Butte, Colo., in 2014. The dogs search for missing or buried skiers.

safe is something dogs don't participate in: early morning rounds to identify where snow needs to be blasted off the mountain so it doesn't fall.

Deadly avalanches

During the past five winters, avalanches have killed 145 people in the United States, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, the central archive for U.S.

avalanche data. The typical victim was a skilled male skier age 25 to 40. Many fatalities take place in the backcountry rather than on groomed slopes.

Erica Mueller got to see how the Crested Butte dogs work when she volunteered to spend part of an hour in a roomy snow cave waiting to be found, armed with a radio and wearing several layers to stay warm.

"I can't talk like a survivor," said Mueller,



Matt Palmer/Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows via AP

Border collie Wylee took a ski lift to get up a mountain in Olympic Valley, Calif., last year. As a ski dog, he oftentimes rides on handler Chris Noble's shoulders or his backpack so he won't be tired when they get where they need to search for possible avalanche victims. Depending on terrain and snow depth, Wylee can keep working for up to two hours if needed, and hop a ride on a snowmobile back down the mountain.

who now works as Crested Butte's director of innovations and relations, "but it was definitely a cool way to see how well trained those dogs are."