

Juan de Fuca searchers dedicate 12,500 hours in training, tasking in 2024

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With more than 40 callouts this year, a team of volunteers responsible for finding and extricating lost souls on the West Coast looks to build on its roster, and replace much-needed equipment in 2025.

The Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue team is made up of about 40 active members based in East Sooke and covering that area through to Port Renfrew.

“Our volunteers contributed more than 12,500 hours in training and callouts,” coordinator and search manager Victoria Clarke told the Sooke News Mirror.

The team also provides primary mutual aid to the rest of southern Vancouver Island and the Southern Gulf Islands. But by far the busiest calls are for lower limb injuries and lost or overdue hikers on the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail – a relatively short trail with some significant hazards, including tree roots, that can get wet and muddy.

“It’s a busy trail and it gets the third highest calls in the province,” Clarke said. “You get weather coming and it’s easy to underestimate it, and accidents happen no matter how prepared you are.”

Volunteers train a minimum of 10 months a year, with many more committing to specialty teams – rope, swift water, tracking and advanced first aid teams – or management and leadership skill development.

“They’ve all been really committed this year to adding to their skills with ongoing training,” Clarke said.

As recently as early December there was a call to find and help get three hikers out. One person had a lower-body injury necessitating a high-angle rope rescue as well as the swift water techs to get the team to the correct side of the river. Training is ongoing, frequently in partnership with neighbouring teams – which they also work alongside while doing larger scale searches – such as Cowichan, Ladysmith and Metchosin.

A goal for 2025 is to continue building on those relationships, both including other search agencies such as Royal Canadian Marine SAR (RCMSAR), Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (CASARA) and local fire departments.

RCMSAR is a charitable organization of volunteers who provide marine search and rescue 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Volunteers operate more than 30 marine stations along the B.C. coast and interior including south Island stations in Victoria, Sooke, Sidney, Oak Bay and Brentwood Bay.

“We’re working hard at developing relationships. So we can call on these resources when we need their expertise,” Clarke said. She recalls an incident where a hiker fell to rocks below and the Sooke RCMSAR team was stationed offshore, “working to ensure we have a successful outcome,” acting as eyes on the scene from the water while a helicopter was tasked with extracting the individual.

“When we’re out on a rescue call we’re out rescuing somebody but we’re always aware we need to be safe as well,” Clarke said.

While one rapid intervention team (RIT) is out on the rescue, another is on standby.

“It’s just having additional resources and expertise that round out what we’re bringing as a ground search and rescue team.”

CASARA is a nationwide volunteer aviation association dedicated to supporting search and rescue programs from the air, and promoting SAR awareness.

“They train a lot and they are very much ready, willing and able to assist us. We again have reached out to them this year to train with them and understand what kind of resources they provide us with,” Clarke said.

CASARA is also an asset providing radio relay in challenging terrain that hampers the signals.

“It just adds to what we’re bringing,” Clarke said, noting Juan de Fuca called on CASARA during a recent search for a missing woman.

The new year brings new gear for the group. As part of long-term planning, 2025 is the year Juan de Fuca SAR replaces its main rescue vehicle.

“That vehicle is a key resource in our response operations. It’s what we use to transport personnel and essential equipment to a scene,” Clarke said of the Ford F350 with equipment box. “It’s definitely aged out and we’re overdue for one.”

Another expensive and expansive replacement is in order – the distinctive yellow Gore-Tex outerwear jackets that help keep volunteer searchers safe and dry.

“Many are no longer waterproof and have reached end of life,” Clarke said. “It’s an essential part of our safety equipment given the work we’re doing.”

The team also recruits in a two-year cycle – in order to streamline the work and resources involved in the endeavour – and 2025 is a year they’ll recruit new blood.

Those interested can anticipate an open house in the spring, followed by interviews and training in the fall.

Clarke says the group is well supported by the province and the Capital Regional District, but just as critically by the people they serve.

“The community has been incredibly supportive as well of our efforts,” Clarke said.

“I feel like you step away from your family life and your work life to commit these volunteer hours so it’s really nice to give a shoutout to the work that’s being done.”