

VIDEO: A peek inside helicopter training with Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue

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Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue team training includes boarding and debarking a hovering helicopter in Jordan River.
(Christine van Reeuwyk/Sooke News Mirror)





As volunteers with Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue filter into Jordan River for training, the sunny day across the rest of the South Island is socked in with fog.

It's not unusual for this part of the region to have pockets, and so preparations this misty Saturday morning include a pair of landing zones and potential to abort the training altogether.

This is one of the sexier, and riskier, days of training for the ground search and rescue volunteers – boarding and debarking a hovering helicopter.

A mandatory annual exercise, Juan de Fuca SAR does it every year with West Coast Helicopter, a key partner in their tasks as well as training.

"It's always exhilarating anytime there's a helicopter involved," says Michelle Holmes.

RELATED: Return of the dog: Metchosin SAR's latest member has a nose for the job (<https://vicnews.com/2025/10/07/return-of-the-dog-metchosin-sars-latest-member-has-a-nose-for-the-job/>).

RELATED: 'Hazardous' search among reasons for myriad Oak Bay Sea Rescue awards (<https://vicnews.com/2025/01/03/hazardous-search-among-reasons-for-myriad-oak-bay-sea-rescue-awards/>).

Visitors likely noticed the helicopter lifting, circling and landing repeatedly at a dryland log sort that Saturday. As the fog lifted, teams of five spent time approaching the hovering machine, climbing aboard, buckling in and subsequently reversing the order of operations.

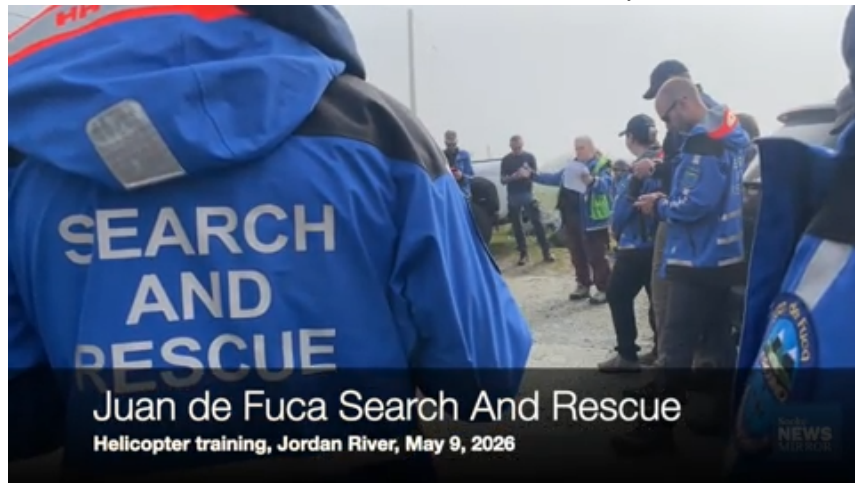
Low and slow are key, the pilot urged the group ahead of time as part of the safety briefing.

For those new to the training, it was a three-peat effort, while those doing their annual recertification were one-and-done.

The group boasts a dozen new members this year. The new recruits, carefully selected from 100 applicants, put in high investment right off training two or three times a week and completed an overnight survival camp.

Any training can be dangerous, but things like boarding a hovering helicopter or entering a raging river to practice water rescues, even in a training capacity, are inherently risky.

Trust in each other is critical, Holmes said. That reliance runs from "did you tie that knot well?" to "I'm going to give you my heart for a moment."



The BC Search and Rescue Association (BC SARA) uses the term "unpaid professional volunteers" for its 3,200 highly-trained people who invest time and energy to keep people safe across the province. Teams specializing in ground search, alpine rescue and swift water rescue manage up to 2,000 incidents annually.

Ground search and rescue in B.C. is done solely by volunteers on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, providing dedication and expertise at no cost to the individuals they rescue.

RELATED: Juan de Fuca SAR lead earns B.C. medal for heart, vision and resilience (<https://vicnews.com/2025/08/22/juan-de-fuca-sar-lead-earns-bc-medal-for-heart-vision-and-resilience/>).

RELATED: Close to home: Locals make up 95% of search and rescue calls in B.C. (<https://vicnews.com/2025/05/17/close-to-home-locals-make-up-95-of-search-and-rescue-calls-in-bc/>).

Ahead of the Victoria Day long weekend – the unofficial kickoff to summer outdoor adventuring – BC SARA cautioned enthusiasts that while the province offers incredible opportunities for recreation, search and rescue realities can look very different depending on where you are in the province.

Remote and northern regions, for example, could not get help for hours, according to president, Dale Parker.

"Distance, terrain, weather, access routes, and limited connectivity can all affect how quickly search and rescue groups are able to reach someone in need," he said.

While southern and coastal regions often see incidents involving hikers, trail runners, mountain bikers, paddlers, and climbers, northern and interior regions frequently involve hunters, ATV and UTV users, resource road travellers, remote anglers, foragers, and backcountry campers. Regardless of activity or location, preparedness remains critical.

BC SARA encourages everyone heading outdoors this long weekend to make a trip plan and leave it with someone; check weather, terrain, and local conditions; carry essential gear and supplies; prepare for limited or no cell service; and understand that rescue response times may vary significantly based on location.

Find free tools, resources, and educational materials under Be AdventureSmart at bcsara.com (<https://bcsara.com/>).

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