

To The Rescue

By Elissa Glassman

You are lost in the woods, but there is no need to panic. That is because a group of volunteers provide year-round emergency services.

One of these volunteer teams is Priest Lake Search and Rescue, Inc. It operates under the Bonner County Sheriff's Emergency Services Unit.

Priest Lake Search and Rescue volunteers work year-round helping residents and tourists using the backcountry in the Priest Lake area, which extends from Canada to south of Priest River, and from Washington east to Schweitzer. The team also responds to any other area in Bonner County, upon the request of the sheriff.

Led by Northern Lights member Mike Nielsen, Priest Lake Search and Rescue was formed in January of 2001, and became operational in September of 2001. Team volunteers have been directly involved in assisting numerous lost and/or injured persons. Comprised of 68 volunteers, the vast majority of the team are Northern Lights members.

One rescue that clearly stands out in Mike's mind was last spring when a toddler, following her puppy, wandered off and was lost for several hours.

"The scary part was that the home was near the lake, and we weren't sure if we should start the search around the water or up a hill into the trees. It was emotional for everyone involved," explains Mike.

"When we found the toddler in the woods, the mother gave me a hug that I'll never forget," he says.



Priest Lake Search and Rescue members discuss strategy after a training session on avalanche awareness.

"That's what makes search and rescue so rewarding."

The Priest Lake area is known for its natural beauty and year-round backcountry attractions. It lies within three counties in two states, and borders Canada on the north.

Because of the vast area search and rescue covers, radio communication is essential to successful missions. It helps save lives and gets injured patients to medical providers quicker. Regular 5-watt portable radios are not sufficient in the backcountry. Instead, 50-watt radio relays are required for effective radio communications.

The team received a grant from the Priest Lake Chamber of Commerce to purchase 50-watt radios. Northern Lights donated the rechargeable radio battery packs necessary to operate the new

radios.

To provide professional search and rescue services to the Priest Lake Community, the team regularly trains on procedures and equipment use.

The team is considering taking advantage of training available from Federal Emergency Management Agency, which would allow it to become a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT).

This would expand the team's role and capabilities to assist when first responders—fire, medical and law enforcement—are not able to handle the situation alone. ■

Priest Lake Search and Rescue is funded through grants and community donations. To make a donation, contact Mike Nielsen at P.O. Box 78, Coolin, Idaho 83821, or call him at (208) 443-6603.