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REPORTER

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WOOF to the rescue



The Reporter/Joel Rosenbaum

Bob Macaulay, a senior planner for the city of Vacaville, and his dog Quasar train hard for their work as a search and rescue team.

Back-country search team relies on retriever's nose

By STACEY WELLS
Reporter Staff Writer

In today's environment, it's nice to know there are those like Bob Macaulay and Quasar on our side.

Whether rain, snow or sunshine, the search and rescue team can be ready at a moment's notice.

"Disaster doesn't have a constituency," Macaulay said. "Whatever the situation, somebody's lost and they're missing and they need to be found and the difference may be between life and death."

Two weeks ago, the team hiked through 3-feet of snow in search of a lost skier. This weekend, Macaulay is training at an avalanche seminar. Next weekend, who knows. It's hard to make plans.

Such is the life of those who belong to Wilderness Finders, a non-profit, volunteer organization better known as WOOF

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that includes about 15 canine-handler teams.

Members must be certified in advanced first aid or be an emergency medical technician, and they must be experienced at back country survival, able to withstand

three days alone in the snow and be a medium-level cross country skier.

They are called into action from their homes scattered throughout Northern California and western Nevada by the Marin County Sheriff's Department.

Macaulay and Quasar reside in Vacaville, where Macaulay is a senior planner for the city. With a long-held interest in search and rescue and several years of doing it alone, WOOF just seemed a natural route to go.

As a teenager Macaulay suffered severe injury in a climbing accident in mountains near Reno. He remembers little of the scare that left a 12-hour blank spot in his memory and wonders if his interest is motivated by his subconscious.

He suspects there is more to his motivation, however. Why else would he wear a pager all day, train on his days off and

(See Rescue, Back Page)

Rescue...

(Continued from Page 1)
practice when he's not training? As for Quasar, there are certain dog-biscuit bribes involved.

During one practice session, it took the retriever 20 minutes to find an accomplice hidden on the other side of two mountains. Quasar weaved back and forth, covering a quarter-mile swath at a time, until he picked up a scent. Once he found it, he bolted to the source, ran back to his master and barked.

"We'll go out in an area and anytime he smells an exciting human scent he's trained to track that, search and come back and get me and take me to the scent," he said.

The reward for climbing two steep hills in the mud and not chasing a tempting rabbit instead: one biscuit.

With their newly acquired search certificate, Macaulay is anxious to do more searching and expand the team's ability to cover other disasters: avalanches, earthquakes, mudslides.

Quasar seems hungry and willing.