



Flying free: Blair Whitaker, a fan of outdoor sports, faces a chilly month to raise money for an avalanche rescue dog-handling team at Treble Cone.

Month in snow cave for a good cause

John Edens in Queenstown

A Queenstown man is spending a month in a snow cave to raise money for an avalanche rescue dog-handling team at Treble Cone skifield.

Blair Whitaker is raising money for Aspiring Avalanche Dogs, a non-profit rescue charity set up by Treble Cone patroller Matt Gunn, by spending four weeks in a snowy hole at The Remarkables skifield.

Mr Whitaker, who works for the ski area, said he would head up to the skifield during the day to talk to people about the rescue organisation and sleep in a cave near the car park.

He planned to take most of his supplies – a solar phone charger, food, portable toilet, gas cooker and sleeping bag – but friends might bring a burger or two from Queenstown.

The idea stemmed from a magazine article about people who quit their jobs and lived rough for a ski season and he wanted a project that supported rescue volunteers.

Dog rescue demonstrations would be held once a week.

“For me these guys could possibly save my life one day,” Mr Whitaker said. “I’ll probably start out pretty small [in the cave] . . . then, when I have spare time, which I’ll have heaps of, I might put some carpet down.”

He begins his stint in the cave

on August 11 and aims to raise \$21,000.

Mr Gunn said a dog-handling team with one rescue dog, Millie, was ready for the ski season.

A new shipping container base of operations has been set up at Treble Cone this year but the team needs to raise at least \$20,000 to buy a skidoo and gear, such as transceivers, for mountain rescues.

“I’ve been chipping away to create an official organisation based at Treble Cone for a number of years,” Mr Gunn said.

“The environment we are working in is very challenging and we need really top equipment and gear and lots of it.”

The Treble Cone dog team and

handlers are also designated as qualified rescuers for LandSAR and police alpine search and rescues in the Southern Lakes.

In a rescue operation, the team would be deployed by police and meet at a staging point for helicopter pickup or other transport, depending on weather.

The team would liaise with an incident commander, develop a rescue plan based on likely search areas and target potential burial sites using a grid pattern.

Dogs would be directed by handlers to search particular areas within the grid.

To find out more about the snow cave fundraiser visit facebook.com/TheSnowCaveProject.

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