

# Avalanche dog retires to light duties

By CRIS JOHNSTON

THE end of the 2011 ski season has been tinged with sadness for Aspiring Avalanche Dogs (AAD) founder Matt Gunn, of Albert Town, who has retired the original member of the organisation's now four-dog rescue team from "active duty".

During the past 10 years, border collie Blizzid has become the canine face of the organisation, based at the Treble Cone skifield.

"She has had a remarkable achievement having been stationed on the mountain for 10 seasons and operational as a NZ LandSAR avalanche search dog for nine years.

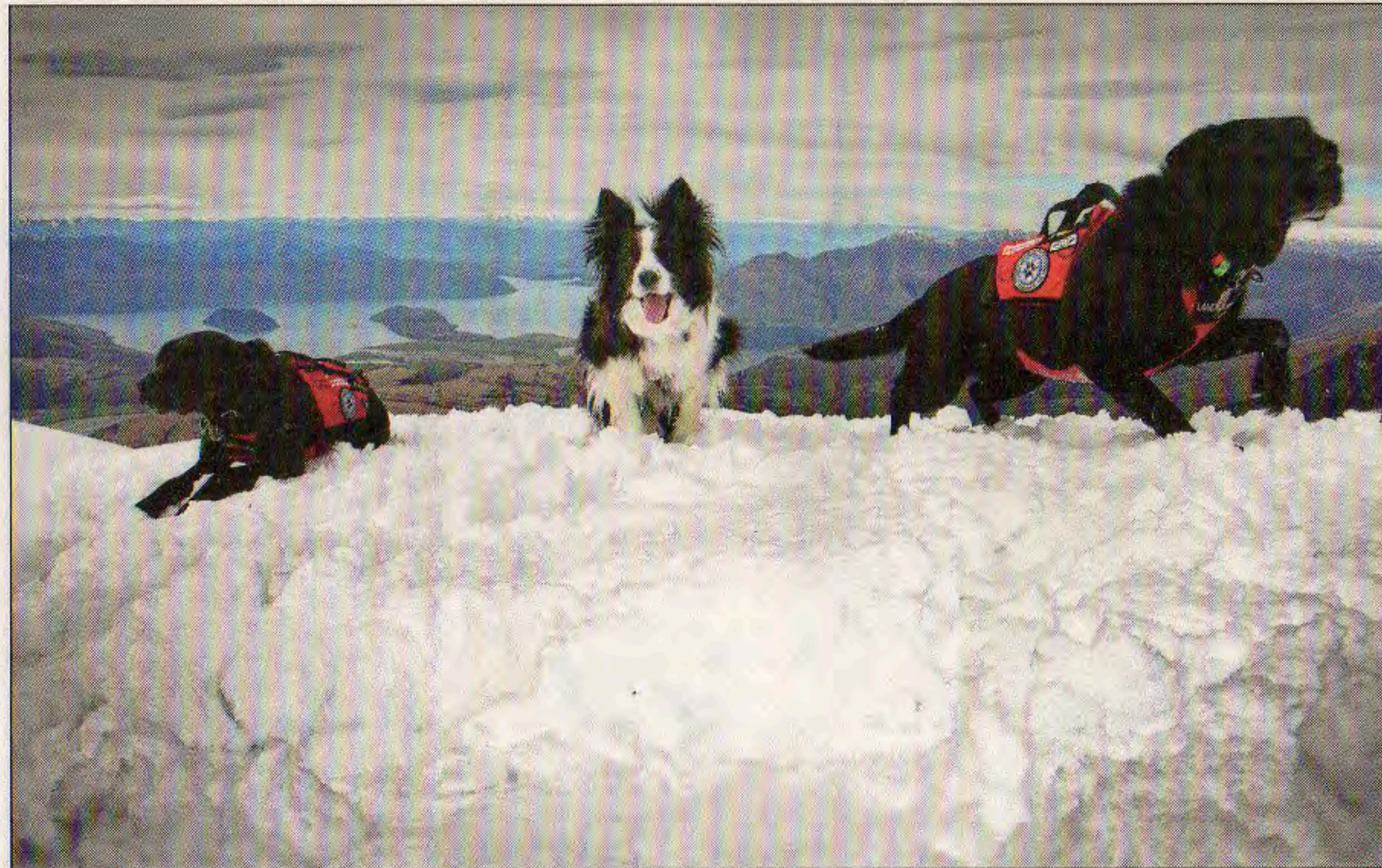
"It is a bit sad but Blizzid is definitely slowing up and her stamina is reducing. It is time for her to step down — she's 10, police dogs are retired at seven.

"She has been involved in seven searches during avalanches of varying sizes and in each case she has been able to indicate there was no one to find — it's an impressive record," Mr Gunn said.

With the rest of the AAD team she was also on standby for deployment to Christchurch following the February earthquake.

The little dog with the comically pointy ears and the "intense" personality still had a role to play, however.

"I will continue to take her up the mountain. Even just having the dogs based there is great for guests — they are really popular and draw lots of questions and are always being photographed," Mr Gunn said.



**Teamwork:** Aspiring Avalanche Dogs (from left) Zeppelin, Blizzid and Millie survey the slopes of Treble Cone. Blizzid (10) is retiring from active duty to be a "publicity agent" for the rescue team. PHOTOS: ALPINE IMAGES

"Blizzid can also assist with our education campaign especially with school visits. She will be the AAD mascot — our publicity agent."

Standing in Blizzid's shadow is Mr Gunn's trainee dog Rocket, a border collie-rough collie cross bred at Dublin Bay near Wanaka.

"He is shaping up really well and proving himself. At almost 12 months old he has matured and is showing all the right attributes to be a cracker of a search dog. He achieved his novice rating at an

assessment this year."

Mr Gunn and Rocket work with other team members — Brendan Kearns and Callum Grant with Labradors Millie and Zeppelin, and fellow ski-patroller Andy Wardell with his Labrador-German short-haired pointer cross Tuki.

Mr Gunn said the dogs were trained to indicate at avalanche sites by barking and digging.

"With avalanches, time is crucial. We can be on site in minutes and achieve confirmation

about the avalanche status. They [avalanches] are like a wave of snow and ice and when the snow stops sliding they set like concrete.

"A rapid response including deployment of search dogs and handlers is crucial to survival."

Mr Gunn said he originally decided to base the AAD team at Treble Cone because of the field's high avalanche hazard and its proximity to back-country that was like a magnet to skiers and snowboarders.

## Thunderdogs fun day chance for one last run

By CRIS JOHNSTON

ALTHOUGH the Treble Cone ski area officially closed on Sunday, snow-lovers have one more opportunity to take to the slopes this weekend when the field hosts its annual charity event on Saturday.

Aspiring Avalanche Dogs (AAD) will be the prime recipient from this year's season finale, now called Thunderdogs, with the Wanaka Rowing Club also to benefit.

Previously the long-running family fun day, which is geared toward Wanaka skiers, boarders and "hardcore" Treble Cone fans, was a fundraiser for St John.

It was a chance for residents to have one more run on the hill, AAD founder Matt Gunn said.

"There will be just 250 tickets issued, which will give access to the six-seater chair lift. The platter, restaurant, magic carpet and rental department will not be operating," Mr Gunn said.

Members of the canine rescue team are raising money to buy a container large enough to house a skidoo. Long term, they aim to establish a permanent base on the mountain.

☐ Tickets for the charity day can be bought from Racers Edge in Ardmore St, Wanaka.