



BY KIMBERLY NICOLETTI

DOG DAYS

FOR ADDED SAFETY AND
AWARENESS AT BEAVER CREEK,
FOLLOW FIDO



Avalanche dogs practice real-life emergency response with Flight for Life helicopters and other drills.

Willy acts as a canine
"ambassador for safety" on
Beaver Creek Mountain.



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As soon as Willy, an 18-month-old golden retriever, reaches the base of Beaver Creek Resort, his energy skyrockets. He greets each patroller and mountain safety team member in the locker room, and then heads to Centennial Express Lift.

"Oftentimes, Willy will get the zooms while I'm walking to the lift because he is so excited to go play on the snow all day," says Mark Carll, Willy's owner, and the assistant manager of mountain safety.

Willy and Carll jump on the lift, then walk to an area of baffles to help the safety team set up. Here, Willy plays with the avalanche dogs before they all go to work.

SAFETY SPECIALIST

Last season, Willy joined Beaver Creek's four ski patrol dogs, but the rescued pup has a special job: He's the first at Beaver Creek — and Vail Resorts — to act as a "safety dog," representing safe practices on the mountain, three to five days a week.

He begins his official duties greeting skiers and riders at the top of Chair 6 first thing in the morning. After plenty of tail wagging, the young pup naps before returning to his guest-greeting responsibilities mid-morning and afternoon. On any given day, he might be hanging out at the top of Centennial Express, at other main lifts or in the slow zone.

"When our guests meet Willy, it gives our employees a positive platform to promote slope safety and etiquette," says Beaver Creek spokesperson Jessie Vandenhouten. "We are trying to change the mentality around slope safety and our mountain safety team. Beaver Creek decided to employ a mountain safety dog to help spread that word through friendly interactions with our guests."

Willy has quickly become the symbol of slope safety, both in person and on trail safety signs throughout the mountain.

"He makes safety fun and interactive," Carll says. "And he's definitely cuter than just a sign with a few bullet points on it."



Six-year-old Luna, a black Labrador, takes her job seriously.

Search training is only one portion of the dogs' overall training; they also rehearse riding snowmobiles, helicopters, ATVs, toboggans and patrollers' shoulders.

Of course, Willy's perfect for the job. Not only is he a golden retriever, which Carll says is "arguably, the most recognizable family dog breed out there," but he's also intelligent, approachable and passive, he says.

"Willy has never met a person or a dog that he doesn't like," Carll says. "He is the kindest, most gentle dog. His personality is all about playing. ...Kids and adults alike grin from ear-to-ear when they see Willy — an awesome sight to see in sub-freezing temperatures."

Carll found Willy — named after Willy's Face, a run off Centennial — through Golden Retriever

Rescue of the Rockies. Carll trained Willy to be a service dog using obedience-training guidelines for Ski Patrol Avalanche Dogs. This winter, Willy also will earn certification as a National Therapy Dog.

The 60-plus-pound dog has built plenty of muscle running miles on the mountain daily; it takes about five cups of Nutro Wholesome Essentials to fuel him during winter. Like most working dogs, he doesn't get many food treats, because his training is driven through rewards such as playtime and praise, rather than treats. And, he receives plenty of rewards on the mountain.

"Willy loves anything and everything outside," Carll says.

His favorite game is fetch, and his favorite summer activity is swimming, which he enjoys just about every day.

"He gets almost as excited to go for a hike as he does going to work," Carll says. "During the winter, if he has the energy on his days off, he's out skinning or hiking with us. Otherwise, Willy is resting and cuddling with us at home."

Between Willy's ski life, summer play and all the love he gets from guests and his family, Carll's pretty confident that if Willy could talk, he'd say: "It's the best life ever!"

CANINE AVY CREW

Every morning, avalanche dogs awake early with their patrol owners, and make their way up the mountain, either by chairlift or snowmobile. Atop the mountain, patrollers work outside the hut, while the dogs usually sleep in their dens.

"The idea is to keep the dogs rested and ready in case they are needed," says Chris Johnson, a Beaver Creek patroller.

After naptime, patrollers spend time practicing search or obedience drills with the dogs.

"Training is a lifelong process that is constantly being repeated and updated," Johnson says, adding that search training is only one

portion of the dogs' overall training; they also rehearse riding snowmobiles, helicopters, ATVs, toboggans and patrollers' shoulders. "Obedience is a very high priority for both safety and management of the canine."

Search training basically consists of a "super fun game of fetch the human," he says. "We travel to elite dog schools that help us learn the techniques to teach the game. We then bring home those skills and spend countless hours perfecting our dogs at Beaver Creek."

Patrollers initially choose puppies that possess a high play drive, meaning they want to chase toys or play tug-o-war. They also look at the parents and choose from quality breeders.

"We don't necessarily want the alpha dog, but a good beta is ideal," he says.

The best candidates are driven to retrieve, hunt and receive praise without being overly aggressive. Of course, they also need to get around in the snow well, navigate obstacles and deal with extreme weather.

Every dog is certified through the Colorado Rapid Avalanche Deployment program, which partners with Flight for Life to deploy teams at a moment's notice in the event of an avalanche. The dogs assist Eagle County Sheriff's Office and other backcountry rescue teams when necessary.

At day's end, the dogs ride on top of patrollers' shoulders as patrollers

ski down, or they take a snowmobile or toboggan. Sometimes, they even get to run down flat parts of the mountain.

On days off, Raven, a ranch dog, loves to herd cattle or ride a horse around on his owner's shoulders. Luna spends her summers rafting with Lakota guides and chasing birds. Trigger's great zeal for life leads to camping, hiking and fishing. Meeka, who spends fewer days at the resort, enjoys retired life but still makes time to crush some Frisbee fetch time.

Together with their new playmate, Willy, the avy dogs have a blast, but when it comes to an emergency, you can rely on the well-trained pack to work like a dog.

MEET THE PACK



RAVEN

1-year-old border heeler/terrier mix



MEEKA

11-year-old Australian cattle dog/border collie mix

TRIGGER

6-year-old pure silver Labrador



LUNA

6-year-old pure black Labrador



WILLY

18-month-old golden retriever



In addition to their duties on the hill, Beaver Creek's elite fleet of rescue dogs assist Eagle County Sheriff's Office and other backcountry rescue teams when necessary.