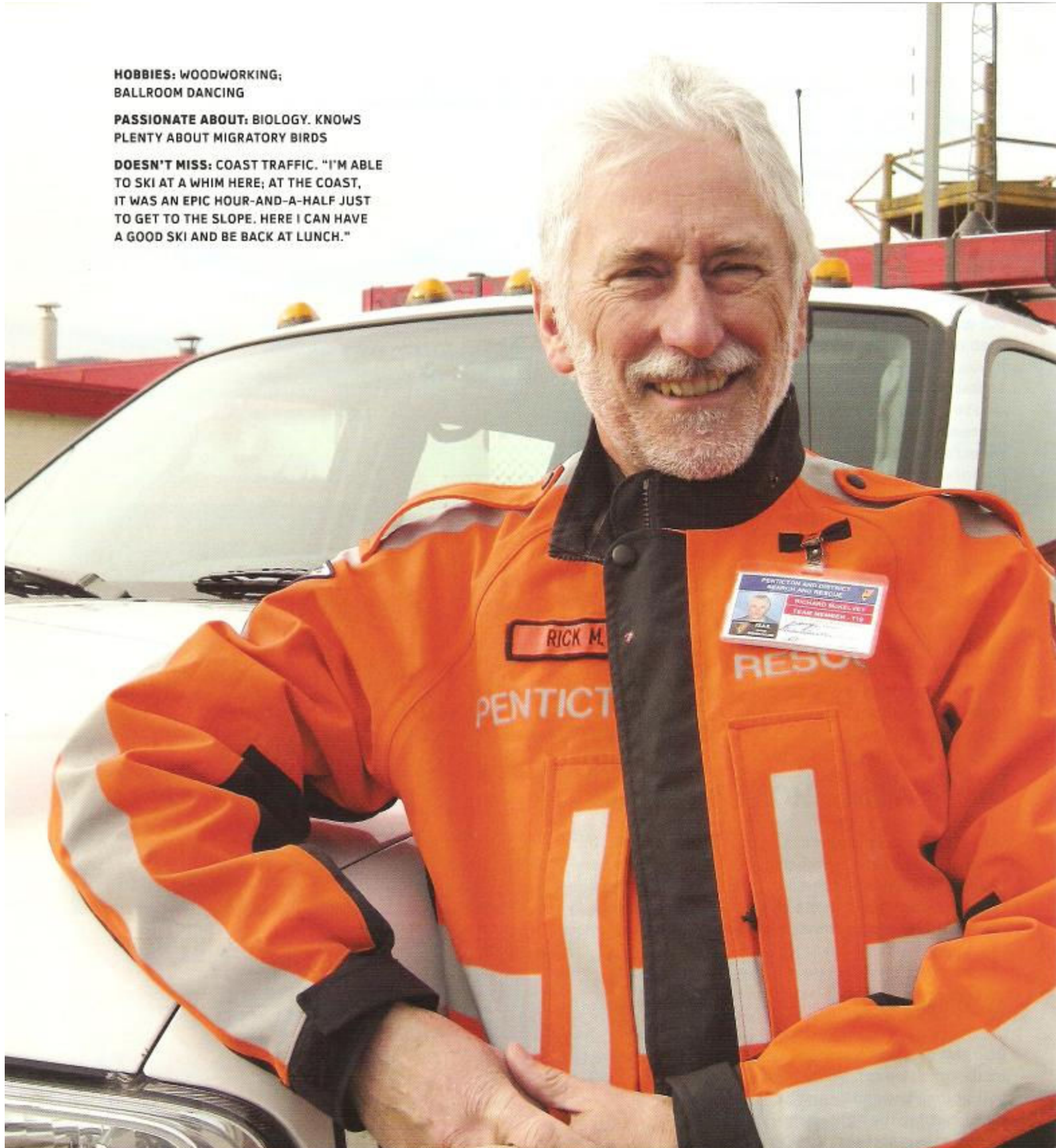


HOBBIES: WOODWORKING;
BALLROOM DANCING

PASSIONATE ABOUT: BIOLOGY. KNOWS
PLENTY ABOUT MIGRATORY BIRDS

DOESN'T MISS: COAST TRAFFIC. "I'M ABLE
TO SKI AT A WHIM HERE; AT THE COAST,
IT WAS AN EPIC HOUR-AND-A-HALF JUST
TO GET TO THE SLOPE. HERE I CAN HAVE
A GOOD SKI AND BE BACK AT LUNCH."



A DAY IN HIS LIFE

6:30 am

SHUT OFF ALARM. EAT BREAKFAST,
CHECK WEATHER FORECAST AND
DRESS FOR SKIING. BRING PAGER,
WATER BOTTLE AND SNACK;
HEAD UP GREEN MOUNTAIN
ROAD TO NICKEL PLATE

8:00 am

MEET WITH OPERATIONS
MANAGER TO DISCUSS UPCOMING
WEEKEND ORIENTATION TRAINING
SESSION. TOUR FACILITIES AND
EQUIPMENT. GET IN A LITTLE
CROSS COUNTRY SKIING

12:30 pm

LUNCH AT HOME, THEN HEAD
TO PENTICTON SEARCH AND
RESCUE (PSAR) HALL. CHECK
ANSWERING MACHINE; RETURN
CALLS AND ANSWER EMAIL
MESSAGES. SORT MAIL

PHOTO BY DAWN RENAUD

ADVENTURE WITH A PURPOSE

Fast water. Formidable cliffs. Freezing temperatures. Search and rescue can be a risky business. Ensuring that volunteers are trained to succeed — and survive — is the job of training officers like Rick McKelvey

by Dawn Renaud

On the steep cliffs above Penticton, a mountain biker slips on the narrow trail and falls some 150 feet. His horrified companion rushes to a nearby home. Serendipitously, the resident is a long-standing member of Penticton Search and Rescue (PSAR).

"He immediately grasped the situation," says training officer Rick McKelvey. His colleague informed 911 that emergency responders would need the help of PSAR's rope rescue team. "As it also happened," Rick continues, "this was a Monday night — we were already coming to the hall. We were up there probably within a half hour of the call, deploying equipment."

Circumstances rarely align so neatly, but these volunteers are always ready. Rick says that if he weren't involved with PSAR, he'd probably be looking for work. "Mostly retired" after 31 years with the Canadian Wildlife Service

regional office in Delta, the active outdoorsman enjoys putting his wilderness experience to good use helping others. "Search and rescue was something I was always interested in."

There's action, adventure and the camaraderie of like-minded people. Socializing is built into many of the team-building exercises, like including a camp-out with weekend wilderness training. Not that it's all fun and games, though. Judging by the long list of training activities posted in the PSAR hall meeting room, membership requires a serious commitment, which is why Rick says his colleagues are best described as "unpaid professionals."

They must respond quickly and competently to a range of situations, many risky. While the element of danger adds a certain thrill to their work, members participate in a rigorous provincially established training regime to minimize the danger.

PSAR's primary role is to search for and rescue lost or injured people, but they may also take on other responsibilities during emergencies and disasters such as assisting with communications and helping the RCMP search for and collect evidence. Several members have additional training for particularly dangerous circumstances like swift water rescue and there's a full team specifically trained for rope rescue.

The program is also designed to ensure that each provincial SAR team can function smoothly under different leadership. "Our primary focus is the greater Penticton area — Summerland to OK Falls — but in fact our area of operations is the Regional District," Rick explains.

There are other operational groups in Oliver-Osoyoos, Keremeos and Princeton, but PSAR members may be called

>>>

2:00 pm

PLAN SKI HILL ORIENTATION AND SEND OUT REMINDERS TO PERSONNEL. UPDATE FINANCIAL SPREADSHEET TO INCLUDE RECENT PURCHASES AND REPAIRS. CHECK STATUS OF FUNDING APPLICATIONS

3:00 pm

REVIEW NEW MEMBER APPLICATIONS. TRANSCRIBE NOTES FROM LAST WEEK'S TRAINING PLANNING MEETING AND UPDATE WALL CHART. HEAD HOME FOR SUPPER

6:50 pm

PICK UP A COUPLE OF DOZEN DONUTS AND HEAD BACK TO HALL FOR WEEKLY TRAINING SESSION. MAP AND COMPASS EXERCISE FOR NEW MEMBERS, ROPE RESCUE EXERCISE FOR SENIOR MEMBERS

9:05 pm

FINISH TRAINING SESSION; TURN OUT THE LIGHTS, LOCK THE DOOR, AND HEAD HOME FOR THE NIGHT

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in to help in those areas or sometimes PSAR needs help.

When a youngster was reported missing in the Summerland area, "we brought mutual aid in from Oliver-Osoyoos because they had more ATVs than we had and they had somebody who is an expert tracker," Rick says. Numbers were also a concern. The search area was potentially very big and several hours had passed since the child was last seen at home. Picture that home as the bull's eye in an ever-expanding target and after eight hours of searching the members needed to be spelled off.

Eventually the search was halted due to darkness. Although sound travels better at night and there is less distraction from other lights, Rick says that in this case the small rural holdings and an up-and-down landscape provided numerous places for a youngster to go unnoticed. There was also a possibility that the youth was avoiding being found. Early the next morning the team reassembled and, fortunately, the search ended happily.

Constant practice is essential to successful outcomes in emergency situations including search and rescue. With every passing hour the search area grows larger while the likelihood of survival for the subject rapidly diminishes. "A lot of times when we get involved with things, they've gone on for a while," Rick says. "I'd like to think that most searches turn out alright, but we do a fair amount of recovery, too."

Even when teams are able to swing into action immediately, the outcome isn't always positive. Sadly, the cyclist who plunged over the cliff succumbed to his injuries.

Unsuccessful rescues are a difficult part of the job. So are recoveries, but providing a sense of closure is important. "It's got to be done," he says, and the discipline SAR members have learned through their training helps prevent further disaster. "We have the skills to do it, so we don't mind." ■