



*Daisy with handler
Chad Feagler*

Snow Angels

Labrador Retriever leads the way for
dogs in avalanche search-and-rescue
deployments at Steamboat Ski Resort.

By Jen Reeder



Avalanche Dog Daisy

Imagine being buried under 6 feet of snow, trying to conserve your breath. Suddenly, you see the paw of a dog break through, bringing a rush of fresh air and sunlight. The hole widens to reveal the smiling face of a black Labrador Retriever digging her way to you while ski patrollers praise, “Good girl, Daisy!”

Meet Daisy, an avalanche rescue dog at Steamboat Ski Resort in Colorado. Each winter, the 3-year-old Lab hits the slope to train to use her nose to work in search and rescue, in case an avalanche buries skiers or snowboarders at the resort.

When the resort added over 650 acres of extreme terrain in 2023, Daisy transitioned from family dog for Chad Feagler, a ski patrol supervisor, to working dog. In fact, she became the very first avalanche rescue dog at the resort. (The young dog was joined a week later by a second avalanche dog-in-training: puppy Mudd, a Belgian Malinois mix handled by Nate Birdseye.)

“Daisy has a keen natural sense for it,” Feagler says. “She’s got such a super nose that sometimes it’s hard for me to keep up with her.”

That’s vitally important, since “avalanche rescue is a ticking clock,” as he

notes. Over the past decade, an average of 27 people died in avalanches each winter in the United States, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, which maintains the central archive for U.S. avalanche accidents.

Additionally, a Canadian study found a 90 percent survival rate for people buried by an avalanche for 10 minutes or less—a number that plummets to 36 percent when buried for 11 to 20 minutes.

Lifelong Learning

Fortunately, Daisy and Feagler haven’t had to deploy for an avalanche rescue



Left: Daisy alerts by digging; right: Daisy alerts during training

mission yet (knock on wood), but in the winter season, they train each day on the slopes as part of their job.

“Basically, if someone was caught in an avalanche, and they were stuck in there and didn’t have a transceiver (beacon), which would be the way a human could find them, we would let the dog go on the avalanche path and she would use her nose to find the scent and alert us where the person was.”

Daisy alerts by digging and then gets rewarded with a toy. When she first started training, Feagler would dig a hole for another ski patroller to stand in—uncovered—say her name in an excited way and reward her when she’d go into the hole.

Now she’s advanced to searching for “multiple burials”—with two humans hiding in up to 2 meters of snow—and search areas as wide as 75 meters by 75 meters. The Lab happily rides up the slopes on ski lifts, helicopters, or snow-

mobiles, and races down the packed snow between Feagler’s legs while he skis (and holds onto her harness to prevent her paws from being accidentally clipped by a ski) or calmly sitting on the back of a ski patrol toboggan.

“There’s a lot to being an avalanche dog. It’s a lot of training,” he says. “The thing about it is Daisy loves being up there with the people. The ski patrol is her second family, so it’s fun to do. It’s a huge game for her.”

Side Gigs

Daisy offers stress relief to the staff as she makes her rounds in the locker room each morning, greeting all her favorite people. When guests stop by the ski patrol stations, they’re also eager to pet her.

“She’s got a huge talent for touch, so you can really pet her,” Feagler says. “She loves pets and she loves hugs. That’s just part of her personality.”

That affectionate nature is one reason why Labs can be terrific avalanche dogs, according to Sally House, avalanche dog program coordinator for Steamboat Ski Resort. In fact, she’s actively talking



Axel Feagler snuggles with Daisy

with Labrador and Golden Retriever breeders because she’s interested in training her own avalanche rescue dog. She’s partial to Labs because her previous dog, Tucker, was “just a good, solid black Lab.”

“They’re just really easy to train, they



Safety Dog Powder with handler Duncan Draper



Powder the Safety Dog loves people.

love people, and they aim to please,” she says. “With an avalanche rescue dog, we’re training them for a very specific job. However, a lot of their job on the side is being a good icebreaker for us to be able to talk to the public about safe skiing, not just in the resort, but in the backcountry. So it’s really important to have the dog want to be around people.”

Avalanche dogs like Daisy and Mudd help handlers share information with



Daisy with Monica, Axel and Micah Feagler

guests about the Skier Responsibility Code and basic safety tips, like skiing with a buddy on powder days and

agreeing on a meeting point, knowing where you’ll ski, being familiar with ski equipment and avalanche rescue gear,

Top and bottom left: Steamboat Ski Resort; right: Chad Feagler



Daisy is toy motivated and her reward for a find is play.

and never skiing out of control.

They're augmenting the work of Powder, a Saint Bernard who is Steamboat's "Safety Dog." Though Powder doesn't work in search and rescue, she helps keep folks out of trouble by riding the resort's gondola to the top of the mountain on weekend mornings and wiggling joyfully while she greets guests for hours. Her handler, Duncan Draper, snaps selfies for dog lovers while spreading the word about ski safety, like avoiding skiers downhill from you and stopping where you can be seen.

Inevitably, people simply seem to gravitate to Steamboat's three irresistible dogs, according to House.

"Everybody seems to be really happy when they see them," she says. "Sometimes we get little kids who get lost and separated from their parents and they'll come hang out in our duty stations. And it's really nice when we have a dog there that can go hang out

with them and give them a little bit more sense of home and relaxation."

Being a Dog

After a day on the slopes, relaxing at home is one of Daisy's favorite activities. The Lab delights in spending her downtime with Feagler, his wife, Monica, and their twin 9-year-old sons, Axel and Micah.

"Daisy just loves them," Feagler says. "She's a Lab!"

In the off-season, Daisy joins her family for hiking and paddleboarding, and enjoys catching Frisbees, fetching balls, and napping.

"In the summertime, she's not on as much. I just let her be a dog," he says. "I think it's important to let your dog be a dog. She sleeps in our bed. We play with her and pet her. She's definitely a part of the family."

Still, when it's time to head to work, Daisy is ready. Feagler says she always seems at ease as long as she's with him.

For example, on her first time riding a short ski lift, she trembled a little bit, but by the second time, she was "completely fine."

It's their strong bond and focus that makes them such a successful avalanche rescue dog team, according to House.

"Both Daisy and Chad are super even-keeled and levelheaded – and hard workers," she says. "They're very connected to each other, so they work really well together." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

Follow Daisy's adventures on Instagram: [@daisy.the.avy.dog](https://www.instagram.com/daisy.the.avy.dog)
For more information about Steamboat Ski Resort, visit: [steamboat.com/the-mountain](https://www.steamboat.com/the-mountain)