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Volunteer pilots answer police call for help



The Highland Air Search helicopter called out to look for a missing woman at the weekend

A NEWLY ESTABLISHED air organisation came into its own in the extensive, two-day search last weekend for missing Tain woman, Johanne MacDonald who was eventually found safe and well.

Members of Highland Air Search (HAS), a Tain-based charity, rallied to a call for help on Saturday morning from police.

Within an hour of the police appeal, the organisation had five aircraft, including a helicopter, in the air.

Highland Air Search founder, the appropriately named Dickie Bird, said: "During the day, a total of nineteen separate flights were made by our pilots and their observers.

"We operated under the direction of police and searched Tain Links, Tain bombing range, the Tarbet Ness peninsula and Nigg Hill."

The search was called off as darkness fell but resumed again on Sunday when Highland Air Search was again asked to assist.

Mr Bird said: "After a thorough briefing at Tain Police Station, we launched two aircraft to search an area of woodland to the east of Tain links."

Missing woman Ms MacDonald was eventually found on Sunday at Tain Links by a member of the Dornoch Coastguard team.

During the search, HAS volunteers liaised with the Air Rescue Co-ordination Centre at RAF Lossiemouth and the crew of the station's rescue helicopter 137.

Mr Bird said: "As a result of our input into this incident, we are now planning to hold a joint search exercise in the very near future with police dog handlers based at Tain.

A community-based initiative, HAS provides a voluntary air observation and search capability for the emergency services.

It covers an area stretching from Aberdeenshire, across Ross-shire, Sutherland and the Orkneys.

Mr Bird, of Hill House, Rockfield, Tain, came up with the idea after being asked in June by Northern Constabulary, through the British Red Cross, if he could take to the air in his own light aircraft, to assist with the search for a vulnerable missing person.



The pilot of this fixed wing plane also took to the air on behalf of Highland Air Search

"It was a windy day," he recalled, "and the emergency services helicopter was not available, it being tasked elsewhere on a rescue.

"Anyhow, I was more than willing to assist and over a five-hour period managed to search an extremely large area of sea, sandbanks, coastal inlets and forest on behalf of the police and the Red Cross."

This was effectively the birth of Highland Air Search, and Dickie quickly sold the volunteer search concept to many of his local pilot friends.

As a result, HAS now has a small fleet of aircraft, including two small helicopters, at its disposal and all volunteer pilots provide their time and aircraft to the emergency services completely free.

Mr Bird added: "Weather conditions permitting, and only when requested to do so by the recognised emergency services, we can provide an aerial search capability, usually with a pilot and an observer team.

"However, I must make it clear that we are not part of the emergency services itself and we do not operate on an immediate response basis."

HAS was awarded a £2000 grant last month from the Scottish Community Foundation towards the cost of procuring a handheld thermal imaging camera.

The camera can be used from an aircraft, to help detect anyone in dense woodland and buildings.

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Ian Rideout, operations director with the British Red Cross in Northern Scotland, said: "We are impressed with the organisational planning, strategic objectives and beneficiary focus of Highland Air Search.

"It is our view that there is a need for an organisation such as HAS to be able to support missing person search operations using qualified and experienced pilots as volunteers.

"It is also, in our experience, essential to have an airborne observation capability when operating in flood conditions."



Scanning the ground from the sky in hope of locating the missing woman

He added: "The British Red Cross in Northern Scotland operates the only dedicated flood response and water search and rescue capability in Scotland and we are regularly tasked by the police, coastguard and fire and rescue services to flooding and inland water search incidents across the whole of Scotland.

"When weather conditions permit, being able to call upon the aerial search capability of HAS could greatly assist us in our response."

For further information regarding HAS, please call Dickie Bird on 01862 871555 www.maukair.com

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