



2024

# Colchester Ground Search and Rescue Annual Report



So  
Others  
May  
Live

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## Serving Our Communities






# Our Mission



Colchester Ground Search and Rescue`s mission is to maintain a constant state of readiness of personnel and equipment for search, rescue and incident response.



**Hours of Service**  
**10,886**



**Dedicated Volunteers**  
**75**



**Search Operational Periods**  
**24**

**"So Others May Live"**





# Our Greatest Resource; Our Members

Colchester Ground Search and Rescue is committed to the lost or injured person in our County and all parts of the Province of Nova Scotia. Our dedicated volunteers all have one thing in common: they unselfishly donate their time and energies in order to help others in time of need. Each member of our team brings their own special talents to the task of enabling the Association to continue to locate, access, stabilize and transport lost and injured persons from the wilderness areas of Colchester County and Nova Scotia. We continue to assist Emergency Officials and Area of Jurisdiction authorities when called upon in times of crises. All volunteers are a precious resource to their communities. Those who are willing to help in adverse conditions make personal sacrifices and risk injury while doing so are especially rare. This is the reality of Ground Search and Rescue, and never more obvious as seen in the members of CGSARA. Whatever the time of year, whatever the weather, whatever the time of day... We do what must be done.

*"SO OTHERS MAY LIVE"*





# Message from the President

Colchester Ground Search and Rescue has a long and rich history of service to Colchester County and the Province of Nova Scotia. As the team celebrated 49 years of service in February 2024, many of our members also reached personal milestones in Service to their communities.

Colchester Ground Search and Rescue Association is very fortunate to have the continued support from the County of Colchester and the Towns of Stewiacke and Truro. Without their continued support we would be unable to provide the professional level of service and quality of equipment that we bring to any request for assistance in our Communities and Province.

The team's focus in 2024 was to: Increase the resilience of the team by training more members in the search management roles, while maintaining a solid base of trained searchers and team leaders. Develop a divide and conquer strategy to engage more members in the improvement and maintenance of the building, vehicles and additional offerings by the team such as a medical unit with trained first responders, a mental health unit, an RPAS unit and a K9 unit. The completion of phase 2 of the 4-bay garage with drainage, flooring, electrical and heating. The addition of a generator to enable the team to offer comfort in times of need in the community. The continued effort for financial stability for maintaining and growing the offering of the team to the community without the heavy reliance on fund raising hours by the membership.

The team's commitment to training continued with programs for searchers, team leaders and the search management roles of operations, planning, mapping and communications, as well as specialized training in wilderness survival, wilderness first aid and low incline rope rescue. In addition to training members in managing lost person incidents and lost person behaviors, members were trained in delivering these courses to better service the needs of the Colchester team as well as other teams in the North Nova zone. Our mental health unit continued to train more members of GSAR as well as fire on Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training, which increases in relevance with the increase in searches for despondent souls.



# Message from the President

The search activity was up this past year with a trend toward more mutual aid responses outside of the county. Colchester's expertise was called upon at all levels: searchers, team leaders and search management with the need for Colchester to run multiple operational periods outside of Colchester County. This speaks to the decline in resources for some of the teams particularly in the North Nova zone and the need for continued recruitment and training and funding so that Colchester can continue to support both Colchester and the rest of the province when called upon.

In 2025 we will be celebrating 50 years of service to Colchester County and the province of Nova Scotia. Plans have started to raise funds to commemorate this significant milestone. Work will continue to complete phase 2 of the 4-bay garage section of the building. Efforts will continue to grow and train the team so that we can continue to offer a high level of service to our communities. The strong commitment and involvement of the members of this team bode well for its future in Colchester County.

Kevin MacLean  
President, CGSARA

# Where We Came From



CGSARA was founded in 1975 after two small children were lost, with one of the children dying of exposure. At the time there were no organized search teams to look for them. Untrained volunteers were used unsuccessfully. In fact, one of the volunteers died during the search effort. Lack of proper equipment and training were contributing factors in the fatality. Out of this event the need was realised, and our team was created and incorporated as a not-for-profit society that same year and is now registered with the Registry of Joint Stocks of Nova Scotia, ID#1257016.



CGSARA's home base is located at 73 Ventura Drive, Debert Nova Scotia. This facility houses vehicles and equipment, offices, kitchen, meeting and training classrooms. With permission of the owner, the team also takes full advantage of the over 2000 acres of surrounding wilderness areas to conduct valuable training. CGSARA is one of the larger teams within the Nova Scotia Ground Search and Rescue

Association, with its primary area of responsibility being Colchester County, though our team has been frequently deployed upon request to all parts of the province, assisting in all functions at larger search operations.

CGSARA is a group of volunteers that form a Ground Search and Rescue team, which is a self-directed and managed community organization. The team is organized, trained, and equipped, to locate, access, stabilize, and transport to safety a person or persons lost and/or injured in wilderness or wilderness interface areas of the Province of Nova Scotia.





# Our Team & Resources

Colchester Ground Search and Rescue is one of 23 teams in the province, and one of five in Central Zone North. The team operates under the Incident Command System (ICS) structure on searches and in house.

## Team Personnel

- 7 Search Managers - (National Association for Search and Rescue certified)
- 70 Wilderness trained searchers - (CSA certified)
- 4 Wilderness Medical First Responders - (Red Cross)
- 2 Lost Person Behavior Instructors
- 3 ASIST Trainers - (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills - Livingworks)
- 2 Road to Mental Readiness Trainers - (Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research)
- 1 ARGO instructor - (Ultra Terrain Vehicle) (Canada Safety Council certified)
- 12 ARGO operators - (Canada Safety Council certified)
- 4 RPAS pilots - (remotely piloted aircraft systems) (Transport Canada licenced)
- 4 Human trackers - (Elder Sir Joe Michaels of Indian Brook)
- 1 Canine tracking team in training

## Command Resources

- 1 Command Post Trailer
- 4 Station networked Computer System
- 1 Real Time Tracking Radio System
- 1 Trunk Mobile Radio System (EMO)
- 1 ICOM Provincial Radio System
- 1 Marine Radio
- 1 Air Operations Radio
- 50' telescopic aerial communications mast
- Starlink Satellite Internet Service



## Vehicles & Critical equipment

- 1 Remote Rescue Trailer/ Comfort Station
- 1 Food Service Unit
- 2 One Ton Dodge trucks with sliding Trays
- 1 Ford Expedition Transport Vehicle
- 1 Tracked Argo Remote Rescue vehicle
- 3 Litters with Mule litter wheels
- 1 Winter evacuation toboggan
- 2 Wilderness Trauma Kits
- 2 Low Angle Rope Rescue systems
- 3 hypothermia management kits



# Scope Of Operations



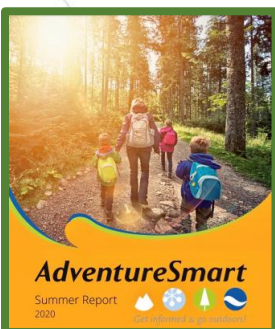
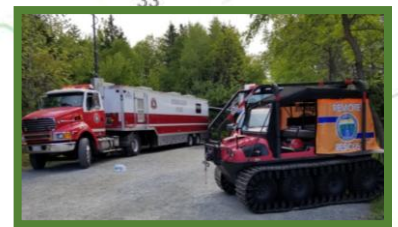
**Lost Person Searches** Colchester Ground Search and Rescue has the highly trained personnel and modern equipment to enable them to search for lost, missing, despondent and/or injured individuals and groups of all ages in all terrain and weather that Nova Scotia has to offer.

**Remote Rescue Operations** Colchester Ground Search and Rescue performs and/or assists in the evacuation of injured or in peril persons in remote and difficult terrain where specialized training and equipment are required to safely bring the individual to the medical help they require.



**Evidence Searches** When called upon Colchester Ground Search and Rescue assists the RCMP or other police services with evidence searches throughout the province of Nova Scotia.

**Civil Response** In emergencies Colchester Ground Search and Rescue can be called upon to assist in Civil Response incidents such as, flood evacuations, sandbagging, traffic control, and mass casualty incidents.

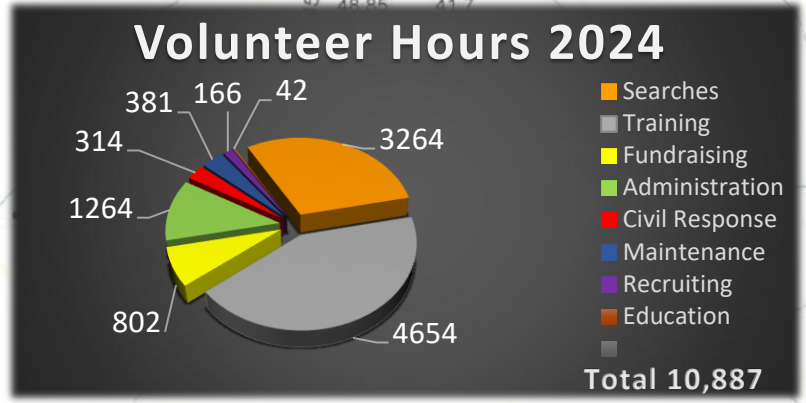


**Public Education** Colchester Ground Search and Rescue at times provides public education opportunities to promote safe wilderness activities. This includes Hug-A-Tree, Adventure Smart, Map & Compass & GPS, and Wilderness First Aid.

**Public Event Services** Colchester Ground Search and Rescue offers various public event services such as First Aid, Medical First Response, traffic control and parade marshalling.

# Our Impact

Colchester Ground Search and Rescue 2024 volunteer hours were up in comparison to previous years. With 16 searches and civil response hours for snow removal in Pictou, our team was quite busy. General and specialized training accounted for almost half our members volunteer time.



Tuesday evenings are the designated training nights for the team. During these evenings two levels of training are offered, searcher training and advanced search tactics. The team ran two searcher courses this year for new members and we also ran a team leader course to strengthen the leadership core within the team. A Lost Persons Behavior course was attended by 12 team members to improve their understanding of the science of finding our missing subjects. Ice Rescue and Water Rescue sessions and a weekend of Winter Survival Skills were held seasonally.



Administration includes, open houses and presentations, and meetings with municipal representatives. Team, meetings, administering of team accounts, by-laws, procedure documentation and operations plannings all fall within these hours also

Fundraising accounted for 5 percent of volunteer hours. Fundraising contributions once again came from parade marshalling for the Truro Pride and Christmas events. We also for the first time assisted with the Not Since Moses race event in June and the Hell's Half-Acre Truck Pulls in North River in July. Through the fall we held a raffle of prizes from local Colchester small business to limited success.





# Our Impact - cont.

SAR Prevention encompasses public education presentations. The team has three AdventureSmart and Hug-A-Tree presenters and were able to provide information sessions for local youth groups within our county.



Our civil response services were again requested after record breaking snowfall along the Northumberland Strait. The team travelled to Pictou and Trenton to assist with snow removal.



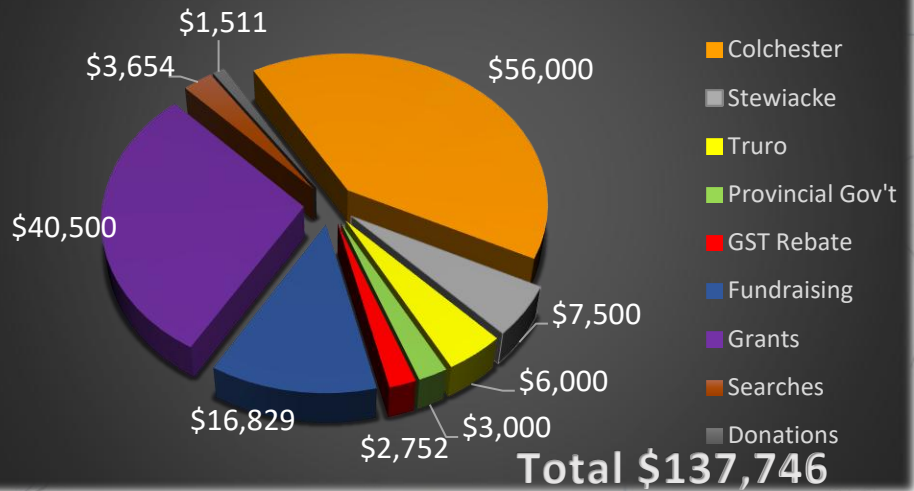
Recruiting was again a major focus for the team in the months of September and October. Between follow up contacts to website applicants and a display of all team resources at the Canadian Tire Mall we've added 12 new members to the team. Their training has started and will conclude in the new year



# Cost of Doing Business

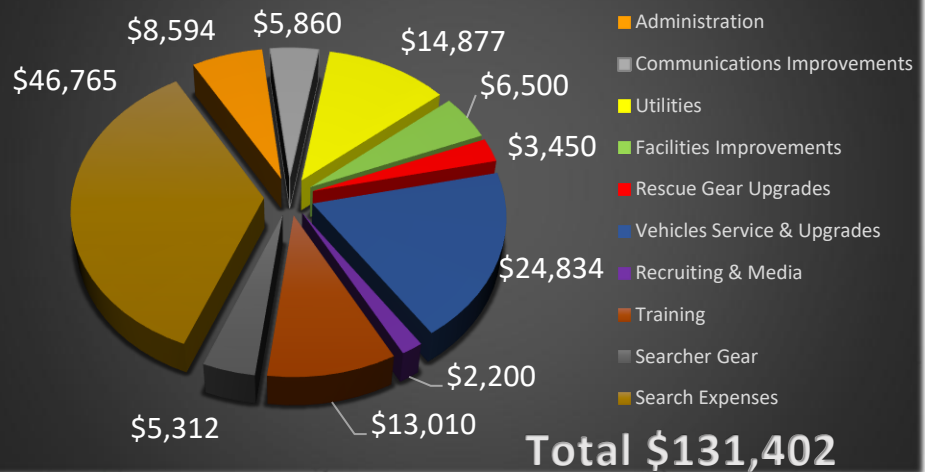
Colchester Ground Search and Rescues fiscal year, 2024, was on par with our funding model. We received our sustainable funding commitments from the Municipality of Colchester and the Town of Stewiacke, along with a small allotment from the Town of Truro. Significant fundraising efforts by the team brought our budget in check with our Sustainable Funding model.

## Revenue Streams 23'-24'



With the surprise approval for the Provincial Generator Grant we are in the process of having our facilities wired and hooked up to a Kohler generator service. One more step towards being available as a comfort center for the community if need be. A contractor has finally been obtained to take the next steps to finish off our 4 bay vehicle garage. Once financial approval from the bank is approved work will start. We also managed to obtain a small piece of land adjacent to our facility to expand our training area.

## Operational Expenses 23'-24'



Retrofitting our previously purchased freightliner is still ongoing, and general maintenance on our trucks and trailers brakes, wheels, and electrical has been extensive due to condensation issues within our unfinished garage.



# Year at a Glance

## Emergency Activations

- On Feb 10 our team was requested to travel to Pictou and Trenton to aid in snow removal after a significant winter storm blew through the area.
- On Feb 24 we were activated to join a search for a despondent lady that walked away from her residence in inclement weather. She was located before the team arrived, so we turned around and headed home.
- On the 27<sup>th</sup> of February the team was activated to Sheet Harbour. A young lady in a state of psychosis walked away from a late-night gathering with her infant child. Unfortunately, the 2 were found the next day in the frigid river, deceased.
- April 8<sup>th</sup> started a 5-day search through Trenton and Mt William for a lady with dementia that walked away from home. Despite some video footage that was obtained no other verifiable clues were found and the subject's location is still unknown.
- April 21 our services were requested on the Gully Lake trail system. A couple hiked in and lost their way. After a 3-hour bushwack in our team located the lost couple and chose to hunker down until the sun came up before attempting the 3-hour trudge back out.
- On May 16<sup>th</sup>, a call was made to aid in the search for an individual that left a Halifax hospital in a state of psychosis. We searched Point Pleasant Park to rule out the subject being there. This search was suspended due to lack of clues. Two days later the subject was found in Fall River, on a small island, naked and still delusional.
- We were called to Chapel Island on June 15<sup>th</sup>. While on route a tip confirmed the subject was ok and not missing, but his location was not being disclosed. The team turned around and the policing authority continued the investigation.
- Brown's Mountain has us visit on July 5<sup>th</sup> for a missing hiker on his own family property he was no longer all that familiar with. As we planned the first search tactics for the day the subject walked out downstream where EHS happened by and picked him up

# Year at a Glance

## Emergency Activations Continued:

- 🕒 July 11, we had a quick up and back trip to the Prospect area of Halifax for an individual that was quickly found.
- 🕒 On July 18<sup>th</sup> we travelled to Baddeck for a missing despondent. 5 days of searching and no clues or answers were found.
- 🕒 July 24<sup>th</sup> a call to Lower Sackville came on for 2 missing children. They left the house sometime overnight but were soon found in a local playground, none the worse for the events.
- 🕒 A trip to Denys River on August 15<sup>th</sup> had us searching for a despondent elderly gentleman that went missing from home. He was quickly located many miles from home by other emergency services.
- 🕒 Oct 2<sup>nd</sup> saw the team called to Tarbotvale looking for a visiting hiker from France that got turned around in the woods. DNR quickly spotted her from the air not far from the Command and she was airlifted back to site.
- 🕒 Late after sunset on Oct 6<sup>th</sup> we were activated to Five Islands for a search and rescue on Moose Island. A teenager was missing from his camping party. The Cormorant helicopter was sourced from JRCC which with their night vision located the subject and gave him a ride back to the mainland so we could provide basic medical aid until EHS arrived.
- 🕒 Oct 14<sup>th</sup>, Margaree Center. An individual with possible dementia followed a trail behind his property and didn't return the night before. Searchers located him a ways off trail shortly after tasking and brought him out to medical care.
- 🕒 Just after midnight December 19<sup>th</sup>, a coordinated search and rescue operation was launched in the Milford area after an ATV rider failed to return home. The ATV rider was found late in the morning with undetermined injuries and was transported to the QEII Health Sciences Centre in Halifax for treatment.



# Team Development

## Remotely Piloted Aircraft System Program (RPAS)

Our team is making significant strides in the development of our Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS), commonly known as drones. With the continuous goal of improving our Search and Rescue operations, we've been diligently working to ensure that all regulatory requirements and operational standards are met. We've successfully adopted all relevant Transport Canada regulatory documents and procedures, ensuring that our operations are safe, legal, and effective.



As part of our commitment to the success of the RPAS Program, we've already invested in the necessary electronic equipment and software. These tools are essential for the efficient operation of our RPAS Program, and their integration into our operations has been instrumental in refining our procedures. Alongside these investments, our pilots have been preparing for the next phase of the program, which in the New Year, will introduce an advanced training regimen<sup>33</sup> to further enhance their expertise and performance.



We are also excited to collaborate with Unmanned Systems Research, based in Saskatoon. They have generously committed to providing us with specialized software and training throughout 2025. This collaboration will empower us to analyze aerial imagery captured during Search and Rescue operations more effectively, helping to locate lost persons in even the most challenging environments. The software's advanced capabilities will allow us to improve our search efficiency and precision, which is critical when time is of the essence.



# Team Development

## Remotely Piloted Aircraft System Program (RPAS) cont...

Looking ahead, we are hopeful that additional funding will enable us to acquire a thermal RPAS—an essential tool for enhancing our operational capabilities. This RPAS, equipped with thermal imaging technology, would allow us to conduct searches in a variety of challenging conditions, including poor weather and during the night. Thermal imaging technology would extend the reach and effectiveness of our operations far beyond the capabilities of our current RPAS.



The progress we've made so far with the RPAS Program is promising, but we recognize that there is still much to be done. With the right resources and continued partnerships, we are confident that our expanded RPAS capabilities will significantly enhance our ability to locate lost persons and improve overall safety in challenging environments.

Our team remains committed to pushing forward with the development of this program and is excited to see how these advancements will continue to transform the way we conduct Search and Rescue operations.





# Team Development

## Mental Health

A major focus of our team has been mental health directed. A critical incident stress management (CISM) full team presentation was held in January and well attended. CISM defuse sessions have been held following a couple of stressful searches throughout the year to allow members to share in a safe place with fellow members.

In October 2022, we were awarded a grant through the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia to provide our members with the Livingworks Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST). Two CGSARA members were trained as ASIST trainers and they have delivered four workshops to date. A total of 58 GSAR members from 7 teams across the province have been trained in ASIST through these workshops, of which 33 were members of CGSARA. This training provides skills to approach individuals thinking about suicide, provide a skilled suicide intervention, and help keep them safe-for-now.



Plans are in the works to improve the mental health resiliency of the team to be better equipped to handle adverse situations and associated psychological risks that may be encountered during a search. We are currently assessing multiple courses to find the one that best suits our needs. Resilient Minds through the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is one such course we are considering as we already have a provisional trainer on the team.



# Mapping Our Future

As we reflect on an activity filled 2024, our team looks ahead to the year to come and anticipates the challenges we will face in 2025. We are motivated to rise to the occasion and overcome our challenges building our team and constantly improving.

Completing phase one of our new building was a significant accomplishment that allowed us to get our trucks, trailers and equipment inside and secured. The new building currently has no floor, no insulation, and no heat. The result is that humidity, condensation and freezing temperatures are a constant threat to our equipment. Our building committee met throughout 2024 and have developed a solid road map for moving forward with phase 2 of the build. A slab with in-floor heat and insulation will be a game changer for us and our gear. ***Our challenge is securing funding and coordinating contractors and volunteers to push this project to the finish line in 2025.***

We are a volunteer organization and many of our members have jobs or other commitments that prevent them from responding to every search. We also have a number of our members that retire or move on to other challenges every year. We need to maintain a certain critical membership level to ensure good responses to searches. We had a successful recruitment event in 2024 that brought in a good number of new recruits. ***Our challenge for 2025 is to learn from our past efforts and to refine our recruitment strategy to attract more new searchers to the team and fostering a supportive and engaging environment that keeps them wanting to stay for the long term.***

Our team has a culture of prioritizing training its members to the highest standard. We have a reputation in the province of producing some of the most highly trained people at all levels from searchers, to team leaders, to search managers. We also have several specialized units that meet and train separately. In 2024 the rope rescue, mental health, OHV, drone, K9 and medical units were all active and engaged in training. Our training program needs to keep up with our evolving membership to ensure our members have the training they need at all levels. ***Our challenge for 2025 is to maintain our high level of training and to ensure we have the right number and level of trained individuals to adequately respond to search calls.***

Historically some of our team members have shouldered a disproportionate amount of the burden of team organization and training. This has led to a certain level of burnout. During 2024 the team made progress in spreading responsibilities out across a wider proportion of the membership. We successfully initiated several new units and assigned unit leads to work towards various goals. We also made progress in spreading the training of new searchers across our team leaders. Our team members collectively have a deep well of knowledge and expertise and the willingness to use these in pursuit of our team goals. ***Our challenge for 2025 is to continue being creative about how we utilize our team resources efficiently to spread the burden more equally among everyone.***



# Mapping Our Future

Over the past number of years, it has been apparent that mental health struggles are a more common aspect of the searches our team is involved with. We have made a commitment to training our members about mental health issues and intervention techniques for situations where our subjects have a mental health component. In 2024 we developed a new mental health unit and assigned a unit lead to coordinate mental health training and activities. ***Our challenge in 2025 is to ensure that our members continue to receive the training necessary to understand and intervene in mental health emergencies including suicide intervention, and to practice these skills as part of our regular training rotation.***

In order to maintain our team and infrastructure in search ready condition, we rely on significant fund raising by our members. As with many volunteer organizations, we struggle to balance the requirement to raise funds with the need for training and preparation for searches. In 2024 we lost one of our major fundraising opportunities and our main fundraising campaign was less successful than we had hoped. The team executive has been in conversation with the Municipality of Colchester County to establish a more sustainable funding model to ensure that the services we provide to the County and province can continue at the high level that has come to be expected from us. ***Our challenge in 2025 is to continue to advocate for more stable funding from the County while developing new fundraising avenues to meet our budgetary requirements.***

As an organization we face significant challenges leading into 2025. CGSARA has been meeting challenges head on and overcoming them since 1975. The same grit and determination that motivates our members to endure hardship looking for lost people also motivates us to keep pushing forward towards our goals of making our team one of the best in the province. We look forward to facing challenges and working as a team, building the organization through 2025.

