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Private searches for missing adventurer Steve Fossett to resume in Nevada

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Brendan Riley, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CARSON CITY, Nev. - The hunt for multimillionaire adventurer Steve Fossett - who vanished last September after taking off in a borrowed plane from a remote Nevada ranch - is resuming now that snow has melted in rugged mountains where he may have crashed.

The search won't match last year's effort that covered almost 52,000 square kilometres and involved a small air force of private and military planes plus ground searchers and high-tech equipment.

This time, two teams of volunteers will hike through a smaller area where the 63-year-old Fossett was last seen.

They're being welcomed by those involved in last year's hunt, who aren't organizing an official search but are providing maps and other detailed information on the harsh landscape the teams plan to cover.

One team will be headed by Simon Donato, a Canadian geologist whose avocation is adventure racing through wilderness areas around the world.

In late July, he'll bring as many as 10 other backcountry athletes, several with search-and-rescue expertise, to hike through a rugged area on the east slope of the Sierra, where Fossett could have gone down.

"You never know what you're going to find out there," said Donato, 31, who is active in the Canadian Adventure Racing Association.

"It's going to be getting into those hard-to-reach areas and basically crossing them off the map," he said. "The best-case scenario is that we find him. The worst-case scenario - we're making it easier for people in the future to continue this."

Fossett, declared legally dead Feb. 15 by a judge in Illinois, "was a hero to so many people," Donato said. "He had a huge following. People loved him. They love adventure, and he was pushing the boundaries. Somebody like that just deserves to be found."

In late August, Robert Hyman, a Washington, D.C., investor, alpinist and longtime Explorers Club member, plans to bring in a team of up to 15 climbers, mountain guides and others with backcountry expertise to check an area just east of where Donato will search.

Hyman says he will focus on cliffs, crevices, ledges, steep canyons and other hard-to-reach spots in and around the Wassuk Range, dominated by 3,425-metre-high Mount Grant. When Fossett, also an Explorers Club member, took off Sept. 3 on what was supposed to be a short pleasure flight, he headed toward Lucky Boy Pass in the Wassuks.

Since last year's extensive search didn't locate Fossett, "we're going to have to do this on foot, the old-fashioned way," Hyman said. "He's obviously in an area that you just can't see from overhead, even with satellite imagery and high-altitude mapping and infrared and everything else."

"If we go out there and don't find anything, OK, well, we tried. And if next week, we hear on the news that someone else found him, that's great. That's what we're all about. That's what we want," said Hyman, 49, who has climbed the highest peaks in all but three U.S. states and has been on numerous mountain and jungle expeditions.

Gary Derks of the Nevada Department of Public Safety, who oversaw the 2007 hunt, said he wishes both teams luck.

"The more people we have, the more eyes and boots on the ground we have, the better our chances are of locating Mr. Fossett," Derks said.

Fossett's widow, Peggy, issued a statement through a spokesman that said that an analysis of high-tech mapping photography done in late 2007 was completed with no results and she's not involved in the upcoming activity and has "no further plans for additional searching."

Lyon County Undersheriff Joe Sanford says Fossett's disappearance remains an open case for his department, whose jurisdiction includes hotel magnate Barron Hilton's sprawling Flying M Ranch. Fossett, an expert pilot, took off from the ranch in a plane borrowed from Hilton, a longtime friend. While no official search is planned, Sanford said search-and-rescue crews will be sent out immediately if the teams led by Donato and Hyman spot something.

"I truly thought someone would find something come springtime when they started traipsing around hunting and things like that," Sanford said.

The sheriff said his department is co-operating with the summer-season searchers as much as possible.

"We're not going to tell people not to go, but what they do if they find something is always our concern," he said. "Where are they going and what do they do if they need help - those are the things that we're concerned with."

"Where is this guy? It truly is a needle in the haystack out there," Sanford said. "But we hope to bring this to a successful conclusion, one way or the other, somehow."

The land around Hilton's ranch, about 130 kilometres southeast of Reno, is so rugged that for some a continued search may seem hopeless. While there are plenty of bare areas that seem to typify Nevada, there also are broad swaths of pine, juniper and aspen trees that could easily hide a downed plane.

Last fall's monthlong search for Fossett involved the Nevada National Guard, Civil Air Patrol, local sheriffs' departments and other agencies, plus friends and admirers of Fossett and other volunteers. The Civil Air Patrol described the search for Fossett and his small, single-engine aerobatic plane as one of the largest efforts in modern history to locate missing aircraft.

Nevada asked Fossett's estate to help pay the state's US\$687,000 tab for that unsuccessful search. The request was turned down last month, although Hilton sent the state a cheque \$200,000 to cover some of the costs.

Fossett, a self-made business tycoon, set more than 100 records in high-tech balloons, gliders, jets and sailboats. He also climbed some of the world's best-known peaks, including the Matterhorn in Switzerland and Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. He swam the English Channel and completed the Boston Marathon, the Ironman Triathlon and the Iditarod dog sled race.

In 2002, after years of trying, the soft-spoken, California-born Fossett became the first person to fly nonstop around the world alone in a balloon, setting the record on his sixth attempt. In 2004, Fossett and his crew broke the round-the-world sailing record by six days.

In March 2005, he was first to fly a plane solo around the world without stopping or refuelling, covering 37,000 kilometres in 67 hours.

Fossett had come to Nevada to scout for dry lake beds as possible locations for an attempt to break the land speed record in a rocket-propelled car.

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On the Net:

Adventure Science: <http://adventurescience.ca/>

The Explorers Club: <http://www.explorers.org/>



Steve Fossett Challenges: <http://www.stevefossett.com>

Story from Macleans.ca:
<http://www.macleans.ca/article.jsp?content=w0611103A>

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Photo caption:In this Feb. 28, 2005, file photo, pilot Steve Fossett talks to a member of the ground crew as he prepares to take off in the GlobalFlyer at the Salina Municipal Airport in Salina, Kan. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/Charlie Riedel, file