

The Avalanche Dogs



MAT+SAR volunteer Susan Whiton and her K9, Temple, sit on a snowmachine at a K9 avalanche training in Hatcher Pass.

By Austin McDaniel

On a sunny yet brisk afternoon high in the Talkeetna Mountains near Hatcher Pass, Alaska, a MAT+SAR search trailer was buzzing with activity. Over a dozen search volunteers from across the state and several K9s listened as a detailed safety briefing was given by incident commander Mark Stigar on terrain, weather, avalanche conditions, and communications details for the area they would be operating in today. While this day was just a training workshop to hone the skills of the K9 rescuers and their handlers, the group understood the criticalness of the work they perform and that a wrong move could turn the reality-based training into an actual search operation.

This mid-March weekend, expert K9 trainers from Washington State traveled North to Alaska to provide world-class training to Alaska search and rescue dogs during the annual Mel Nading Memorial K9 Avalanche Rescue Workshop. The annual workshop put on by MAT+SAR, a volunteer search and rescue organization in the Mat-Su Valley, honors Alaska Department of Public Safety Pilot

Mel Nading who was tragically killed in the line of duty in a helicopter crash in 2013.

The searchers picked up radios, snowshoes, and avalanche beacons and split into two groups. They boarded snowmachines, and sleds departed the staging area in the Gold Mint Trailhead parking lot onto a nearby ridge where snow caves had been dug out earlier in the week. Training dogs for this type of work takes consistent training over months, and today's students included newer search dogs and seasoned K9s that have been at it for years, all looking to hone their skills.

First up in one of the training groups was rookie avalanche K9 named Radar, a multi-colored dog wearing bright green booties. He was giddy with excitement as his handler Lisa McConarty hid in a nearby snow cave with his favorite toy. Radar bounded effortlessly across the four-foot deep snow, searching for his toy and the human holding it just a short distance away. Radar located the cave and his handler with



LEFT: MAT+SAR commander Mark Stigar briefs a group of volunteers during a K9 avalanche training in Hatcher Pass. RIGHT TOP & MIDDLE: MAT+SAR K9 Radar searches for a volunteer in a nearby snowcave during a K9 avalanche training in Hatcher Pass. BOTTOM LEFT: MAT+SAR volunteer K9 handler Lindsay Cronin releases her K9 Raven to search for a volunteer in a snowcave during a K9 avalanche training in Hatcher Pass. BOTTOM RIGHT: Alaska State Trooper's SAR coordinator Lt. Paul Fussey rides a snowmachine during a K9 avalanche training in Hatcher Pass.

ease as she squeaked the toy and Radar was praised for his accomplishment. The pair repeated the exercise several times, increasing the difficulty by adding additional snow blocks and other barriers, but the dog proved his skills to the rest of the group.

The MAT+SAR K9 search and rescue lead Stacie Burkhardt explained that repeating this same type of exercise over a larger area, with more complicated obstacles and deeper snow, helps train the dogs to smell the humans in the snow, the main priority for avalanche search dogs. To the dogs, this is work, but it's fun work with praise and rewards for locating buried search volunteers.

Next up was a more seasoned search and rescue dog named Raven with her handler Lindsay Cronin. Raven has a distinctive harness that is only worn during search and rescue training or operations; this helps the dog know that she is no longer the fun-loving pet but here to work and save lives. About 15 yards away from the snow cave, Lindsay gave the command to search, and Raven tore across the deep snow as she trailed behind. Raven located the snow cave with another volunteer inside and began

digging out the snow around the cave to find her favorite toy and a happy human. The whole search and recovery took only over a minute with the sensitive nose and expert searching skills Raven brought to the snowy hillside.

Over the next two days, the training would grow in difficulty as the K9s and their handlers increase their confidence. While avalanches with entrapment are rare in Alaska, they do happen, and the time spent training this weekend will prepare the group for the call for help.

Volunteer search and rescue groups like MAT+SAR can be activated year-round by the Alaska State Troopers. They respond to search and rescue operations across the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the vast mountainous swath of land brings both Alaskans and those from across the World to recreate and enjoy Alaska's outdoor playground. While the Troopers are responsible for overseeing and managing all land-based search and rescue operations in the state, groups like MAT+SAR are the folks sent into the wilderness or onto mountain ridges to locate missing, lost, or overdue outdoor enthusiasts. For more information about MAT+SAR visit: <http://matsaralaska.org/>