

Rescued Dogs Come to the Aid of Rare Lizard in NM

By: Nicole Haskett Osborn, in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy

Leaping lizards! An unlikely duo is helping to save a proposed endangered salamander with their amazing tracking skills. Former shelter dogs, once considered to be hard to adopt because of their high energy and urge to hunt, are now putting their skills to work in an effort to save the rare Jemez salamanders.

Meet these unlikely heroes: Frehley and Sampson. Frehley is a border collie. Before he was enlisted to aid conservationists, Frehley was just another shelter dog whose past life is better left forgotten. In fact, Frehley's previous owner kept him crated most of the time during his first year of life. For an active dog like Frehley in need of wide open spaces, this must have been tough! Since being rescued, Frehley has helped sniff out all kinds of wildlife such as a wolf, a wolverine and even a grizzly bear before taking on the challenge of hunting out the Jemez salamanders. His partner Sampson is a Labrador who was rescued from the Seattle Humane Society. Sampson's previous field work included research projects on lynx, northern spotted owls and sea turtle nests.

These dogs do something that most humans can't do, and wouldn't want to if they could. They search for scat (lizard poop) armed only with their sense of smell and desire to hunt.

These "conservation canines" are being trained to hunt for the lizards through the Jemez Mountains, searching out the distinctive (to the dogs' highly-trained noses only) smell of lizard scat. Okay, these dogs may not know they are environmentalists, or particularly care that they are helping to save another species. But that doesn't bother them in the least—they are excited to do it! Only the humans (AKA wildlife biologists) know of the plight of the Jemez salamanders that are so desperately in need of their four legged friend's help.

The Jemez salamanders can only be found in the Jemez Mountains in New Mexico. Sadly, their population is dwindling in great part due to warmer temperatures and drought conditions. By mapping out where the salamanders can be found, biologists will be able to create a management plan that will help salamanders as well as the rest of the forest by allowing The Nature Conservancy to move forward with their forest restoration program in the Jemez Mountains without impacting salamander habitat.

Although Frehley and Sampson make-up the entire canine crack team on this project, the Washington-based Conservation Canines team has a total of 11 dogs in active duty. Human project partners in this effort include The Nature Conservancy (project lead), NM Department of

Game and Fish, US, University of Arizona (UA), the Pueblo of Jemez, New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute (NMFWRI), the VCT, SFNF and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As for the future of the program, these two special dogs look to have long careers in conservation.

“We are discussing a return of the dogs to actually lead some surveys, rather than following along with the human crew as they did for their training,” said forest conservation program director for The Nature Conservancy in New Mexico, Anne Bradley. “We felt that the dogs did exactly what we hoped- they responded to the scent of the salamander and showed their ability to find the salamanders in a controlled setting and “re-found” [the lizards] when they followed the survey crew. For example, if the crew members found salamanders in a decayed log, they would leave them on the soil surface or under light bark. When the dogs were released a bit later, they did find these salamanders...We were pleased with the first year.”

Good dogs.