

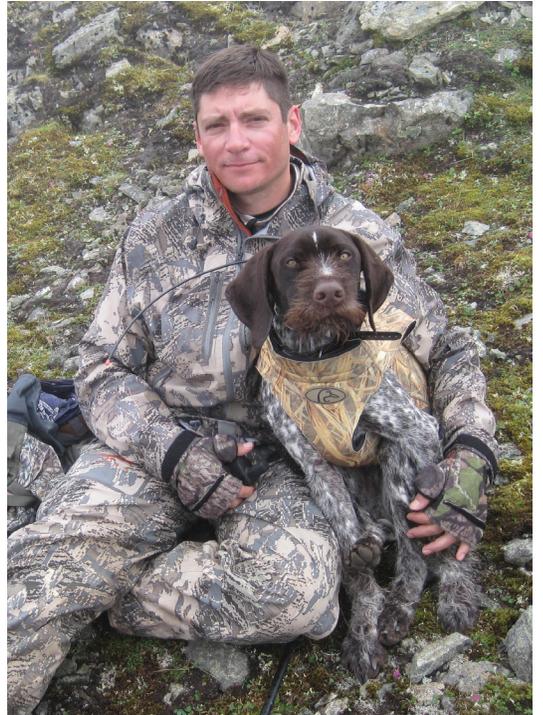


Biologist's Best Friend?

Last month Robb Kaler and Leah Kenney returned to Adak to continue their annual search for Kittlitz's murrelet nests in the mountains south of town. An elusive and little understood seabird, Kittlitz's murrelets are a species of management concern to the US Fish and Wildlife Service because of their low numbers and restricted range. Owing to their cryptic mottled plumage and secretive behavior around their solitary nest sites, locating murrelet nests is extremely difficult, and requires equal parts determination, keen eyes, and good luck. In the past, Robb and Leah relied almost entirely on hiking in suitable habitat (rocky ground, mostly above 1,000' elevation), hoping to come close enough to flush an adult off a nest. Talk about searching for a needle in a haystack--some birds don't flush until you are about to step on them, and they are virtually invisible until they move.

If eyes are not the best tool for finding Kittlitz nests, what about noses? Robb and Leah decided it was time to diversify their nest-searching arsenal, so this summer they brought an assistant with them: Otto, a ten-month-old Deutsch-Drahthaar (akin to a German wirehair pointer). To prepare for his important job, Otto began attending training clinics in February to introduce him to working with pen-reared birds. Robb and Leah also acquired four homing/racing pigeons (named Attu, Shemya, Nizki and Alaid), to ensure Otto had lots of exposure to live birds, nurturing his drive to point while discouraging the urge to chase. Since he is a young dog still learning the ropes, Otto's enthusiasm for birds in the field at Adak was kept in check with a retractable leash.

Using dogs and their amazing olfactory powers to get things done is not a new concept. Dogs have been helping people track and hunt game for about 12,000 years, and their detection skills have long been employed in searches for drugs, explosives, survivors, stowaways and other targets of human interest. Recently dogs have been helping not only humans, but other species that rely on us to protect them. One high profile use of detection dogs is in curbing the illicit trade in wildlife and wildlife parts, a multibillion dollar industry that threatens many species worldwide. "Conservation Detection Dogs" perform many other important tasks, from sniffing out biological targets for research to warding off predators that might otherwise suffer when coming into conflict with humans. In the last twenty years there has been an increasingly high demand for dogs trained in wildlife detection, and there are now Conservation Dog organizations that set national and international training standards to ensure quality control and help researchers understand what they can reasonably expect from their canine partners.



Robb and Otto take a break from nest searching in the Adak mountains. Why camouflage? Predator avoidance is the name of the game. During incubation and chick-rearing, Kittlitz's and marbled murrelets rely on cryptic plumage and secretive behavior at nest sites to avoid attracting ravens, eagles and other predators. For the same reason, murrelet nest searchers wear camouflage.

Capturing geese on Buldir



Even in the Aleutians, Otto is not the first dog to work alongside Refuge biologists. In 1989 an Oregon sheep man named Rob Lewis brought his border collies out to help with the Aleutian cackling goose translocations that were an integral component of the then threatened species' recovery. Every year biologists attempted to capture geese on Buldir Island, one of only two islands where fox farming didn't wipe out the species. Whole families of geese were released on islands from which foxes had been removed; goslings would return as adults to breed on the island from which they migrated in the fall, rather than the one on which they hatched, thus repopulating islands that had been gooseless for decades. The only problem was, first the geese had to be caught. It was a strenuous and dangerous job, struggling through dense vegetation trying to capture geese that often weren't visible as they scampered nimbly beneath the canopy--the holes weren't visible either, and people were frequently injured during those headlong wild goose chases.



No one really thought using sheep dogs would work, but the Refuge was ready to try anything. It turned out to be the perfect solution. Rather than panicking and fleeing, as the geese did when approached by humans, they froze, almost as if hypnotized, perhaps trying to blend in with their surroundings. As long as the dog continued to stare at the goose, it remained immobile, and biologists could calmly walk over and pick it up--the frantic scramble of previous years was replaced by quiet efficiency. The whole operation ran so smoothly, 140 geese were captured in only four days of work, more than had ever been caught before during the three week molting season, and for the first time not a single person was injured. Rob and his dogs returned to the Refuge for several years, capturing geese for translocation or banding. Tragically, one of Rob's dogs, Peat, a nationally known champion border collie, fell to his death while working on Chagulak Island in 1993.

Rob, Peat and Cap on Buldir



...Another good reason to keep a young dog like Otto on a leash when working in the mountains... So how did Otto do, his first time on the job? Of the five nests discovered in early July, Otto located two, and behaved perfectly, watching the birds fly into the fog rather than chasing them. Even more impressive, Otto patiently waited nearby in the blowing mist and fog as Robb and Leah deployed cameras and recorded nest information, clearly demonstrating that he holds a lot of promise to be one of the world's next great murrelet nest searchers.