

Refuge K9 officer receives new name

by Leah Eskelin



Former Refuge K9 Officer Rex will enjoy retirement as newcomer formerly known as Thomi takes up the job. Photo credit: Rob Barto/USFWS.

Who has ever poured over a list of possible baby names, highlighting favorites and writing them down for deliberation? Who has done the same for a new cat or dog? The anticipation that comes before matching just the perfect name to our new family members is fun! It can also be nerve-racking. What will that name sound like when called across a busy room? Will your first choice name fit the personality of its new owner? These considerations and more have been in our thoughts here at the Kenai National Wildlife

Refuge while we await the arrival of the newest member of the law enforcement team. After two weeks of collecting the best inspirations from our community during our “Name our K9” contest, Officer Rob Barto has chosen the new name for his new K9 partner!

Before revealing this new pup’s moniker, here’s a little more about him. The Dutch Shepherd male formerly known as Thomi was born in Belarus and is receiving his law enforcement training in Michigan. Soon, Officer Barto will join him for comprehensive

training as a team before they both return home to the Kenai. This will be the fourth K9 partner for Officer Barto. In the pawprints of the other great dogs who have helped keep wildlife and people safe, this young pup will help sniff out evidence, track missing people in the woods, and patrol the Refuge looking for things that are not quite right alongside Officer Barto.

Are you ready to hear this good boy's new name? After collecting up the best inspiration from our local community, Thomi will be renamed Eider after a lake found on the Swanson River Canoe Route in the Kenai Wilderness. Eiders are a type of sea duck and were called "the swiftest of all Alaskan ducks" in a 1959 publication. Stellar's Eiders spend their winters in the Lower Cook Inlet. Two of the four species of eiders, Spectacled and Steller's Eiders, are listed as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

If you contributed name ideas to this effort, thank you so much for your thought and care. We were inspired by the great options you put forward! In case you have a special furry friend joining your family soon, or if you just like dreaming of future pets, try these great options on for size: Kahtnu, Tusty, Robin, Ski, Tik'a, Suka, Raven, Bear, Skilak, Chug, Kiski, Cooper, Tana, Chinook, Alpine, Shadow and Sura. Again, thanks go to those who added to our options.

Once Officer Barto and his new partner get some experience on the Kenai under their belt together, we look forward to welcoming the public to a larger event to celebrate the great work of our K9 officers past and present on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. While anticipating that event, did you know the Refuge offers a special way to bond with your dog while enjoying being outdoors on the Kenai? The B.A.R.K. Ranger program encourages our canine visitors and their families to B—bag their waste, A—always wear a leash, R—respect wildlife and K—know where you can go: BARK! A guide for any dogs on refuge, the B.A.R.K. Ranger program expands for doggy friends who fre-

quent the area. After demonstrating that they can follow the guidelines, these dogs can earn their very own B.A.R.K. Ranger dog tag and waste bag dispenser to take on their next outdoor adventure.

The very best B.A.R.K. Rangers on the Kenai can become trail stewards with their favorite people. These teams report back trail conditions, help rangers host guided dog-friendly hikes, and demonstrate proper behavior (the B.A.R.K. principles) while adventuring on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Interested in certifying as a 2020 B.A.R.K. Ranger? Call the Refuge Visitor Center at 907-260-2820 or stop by to get more information on becoming a trail steward or wagging walk guide. We are hoping to get a small group of excited pups and their partners ready to lead a couple of dog-friendly summer programs with our rangers, Wagging Walks. Interested in a solo adventure? Consider planning something special with your doggo on National Puppy Day, coming up on March 23.

Ending this article wouldn't be right without taking a moment to thank our very good boy, retiring K9 Officer Rex, who has worked alongside Officer Rob for the past nine years. Rex has several significant achievements under his collar. Most notably, he was instrumental in revealing evidence in a bear poaching case recently. He found a bullet fragment in deep grass that was half the size of a dime, an impossibility for any human. In another case, Rex tracked illegal hunters into a closed area, helping to locate three poached caribou. This winter, Rex will hand over his leash to Eider to continue the good work of protecting wildlife on Alaska's public land. Rex will be enjoying his retirement years as Rob's family pet. Good boy, Rex, good boy!

Leah Eskelin is the Lead Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and manages the Refuge Visitor Center, which is open to the public year-round. For upcoming public events and more information, call 907-260-2820 or find us on Facebook.