

## Dogs train for searching water bodies

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WASILLA — There are plenty of reasons people decide to spend their free time training dogs to search for missing people in lakes and rivers.

For David Tillett, it was just a logical extension of what he'd been doing already as a volunteer searcher in Fairbanks. His German shepherd Kenzie seemed like she'd be good at it.

"The dog had the aptitude and we wanted to see if she can get to that next level," he said Friday at search dog training on Finger Lake.

He said he hopes that Kenzie will be certified to search for missing people in the water and on land by the end of the summer. He said that, so far, Kenzie has been enthusiastic, though that's not uncommon in search dogs.

"They love their job," Tillett said.

For Amanda Price, a veterinary technician who lives in the Palmer area, it was just kind of a logical combination of some of her interests.

"I love working with animals and I have a degree in forensics," she said.

And while both Price and Tillett were training their first search dogs, others in the group who trained this weekend in Finger Lake, Wasilla Lake and the Little Susitna River had much more experience.

Cathie Harms with the Paws search dog group out of Fairbanks is on her fifth dog. The other four were German shepherds, her latest is a German shepherd/border collie mix named Vickers who, Harms said as she restrained the enthusiastic mutt from dashing into the lake, has the high-toned bark of a border collie.



### Search dogs

Patty Howell (left) encourages her dog Diva as the Labrador retriever jumps into Finger Lake Friday to retrieve a toy from Mat-Su Borough dive rescue team member Josh Hunsacker. Local search and rescue group MAT+SAR sponsored the training on Finger Lake and in two other Valley water bodies this weekend.

“Vics is a trainee. She would be quiet if she was certified,” she said.

Randy Walling, with the SEADOGS search group out of Juneau, said that water search is kind of crucial where he lives and he’s been out on numerous searches with his dog, a golden retriever named Seatuk.

“She’s actually got a few recoveries under her belt,” he said.

Stacie Burkhardt was one of the handlers teaching the seminar. With her dog, Sage, who has since passed away, she found more than a dozen people; an unprecedented number for a search dog. Burkhardt is with the organization putting on the training, Mat-Su Search and Rescue or MAT+SAR. She said that the goal of the training is for the dogs to think to look under things. That’s why they’re trained with toys. You have to make it fun for them.

“It’s fun from down under for the dogs,” she said.

The training on the shore started with just having the dogs swim out to a diver and retrieve a toy. Eventually the toy goes underwater. Then the driver goes under as well.

“It’s so they start using their nose instead of their eyes,” Burkhardt said of the dogs.

It’s the same thing they do in avalanche training, where live volunteers hide in snow caves and wait for the dogs to find them.

Burkhardt said after the Finger Lake training the dogs would move to Wasilla Lake on Saturday and then on to the Little Susitna River on Sunday.

“The river work is a lot more difficult because there’s a lot more movement in the water with the scent,” she said.

It’s also harder for the handlers, who have to be more aware and ready to react quickly.

“You don’t have the liberty of cutting engine,” Burkhardt said.

Burkhardt said that, essentially, the search dog and its handler work as a team.

“It’s understanding dog behavior and it’s a case of you trusting your dog and your dog trusting you,” she said.



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Apparently nervous about the whole swimming thing, a Labrador retriever named Diva heads back to shore during a training session for dogs hoping to learn how to search in water. The training lasted three days in Mat-Su and drew participants from across the state.