

Stout nose cracks this shell game

Ridley, a 3-year-old Cairn terrier, aids in search for National Seashore turtle nests

By Elaine Marsilio
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Ridley Ranger



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PADRE ISLAND NATIONAL SEASHORE — Turtle Patrol members spent five hours searching for a Kemp's ridley sea turtle nest.

They found tracks of an endangered turtle near Bob Hall Pier, but winds blew away part of the trail to the nest.

They dug, but couldn't find it.

Then they called in a 2-year-old who has a nose for this business.

Ridley, a Cairn terrier, found it within minutes. The result: 101 eggs to be incubated and 92 hatchlings later returned to the wild. That nest on June 7, 2007, is one of two located by the now 30-pound, 3-year-old terrier.

Ridley's owners, Donna Shaver and Stephen Kurtz, began training him for this work when he was a puppy.

Shaver, the National Seashore's sea turtle science and recovery division director, said she thought of the idea to train Ridley in 2005 when she realized it was difficult to track nesting sea turtles on windy days in and around the park.

Shaver and Kurtz trained Ridley as a puppy to sniff for dog treats around their Padre Island house.

His training quickly progressed to sniffing out empty sea turtle nests on the beach, discarded turtle egg shells and hatchlings so he could recognize the scent, Shaver said.

The couple uses keywords, such as "nest" or "find" with Ridley so he can hone in on his search objectives, said Kurtz, who also is a Turtle Patrol volunteer.

That training has landed Ridley an on-call gig assisting the Turtle Patrol when humans can't locate nests.

Patrol members typically locate a nest by seeing the turtle, or by following tracks and then sifting through sand with a pole or digging with their hands, Shaver said.

Finding nests is a crucial endeavor because Kemp's ridley sea turtles are endangered and the eggs can fall prey to coyotes or raccoons, or wash away with high tides, Shaver said.

"We just don't want to go away empty-handed," Shaver said.

That's where Ridley comes in.

"He can do things, of course humans can't do ... his nose takes over," Kurtz said.

Jill Marie O'Brien, co-founder of the National Canine Scent Work Association, said a dog's nose is its biggest asset, allowing it to detect almost anything.

"If it has an odor and that odor can be identified, you can teach the dog to locate it," she said.

"The dog's nose is like a machine," O'Brien said. "Nature has created something that human beings can't duplicate artificially."

And it's work that dogs like because it's an outlet for natural habits such as sniffing or digging.

"Detection dogs are usually some of the happiest dogs you'll see," she said.

Kurtz, who usually handles Ridley on searches, said Ridley displays his excitement before a search by sitting in Kurtz's lap as he drives his Jeep Cherokee along the beach.

At times, Ridley even places his paws on the steering wheel, Kurtz said.

"That's just Ridley," he said with a laugh. "If I let him, he would ride on the hood."

Ridley even likes the pay: a pat, some praise and the occasional piece of antelope jerky.

The couple's other Cairn terrier, Kayleigh, who will be a year old in June, is in training. She may be ready to help out Ridley during this nesting season, Shaver said.

"Everybody in my family has to help with the project," she said.

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