

Working **K-9** to 5

These amazing dogs have important and unusual jobs

Is your dog on the payroll? He watches the house, keeps squirrels out of the yard, comforts and cheers the family, and serves as your four-legged personal trainer. Maybe you pay him in treats and hugs for all he does.

But some dogs, in addition to holding down the fort and cleaning up the crumbs under the table, do even more.

BY
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In a world filled with dogs who guide the blind, comfort the sick, locate the missing, and even serve in the military, the concept of the working dog is hardly new. But a handful of dogs performs tasks that might surprise you. From locating buried sea turtle nests to pulling Christmas trees, the four special dogs profiled here work hard, not just to please their people, but because they love having a job.

Turtle Tracker

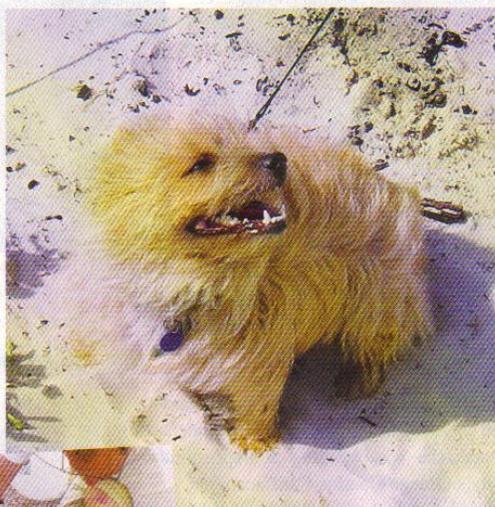
Donna Shaver, Ph.D., had a turtle problem. As chief of the National Park Service Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery in Corpus Christi, Texas, one of Shaver's important jobs is to find buried sea-turtle nests and protect them. Otherwise, predators could destroy them and beach-goers accidentally step on them. And Shaver was faced with a stumper one morning.

"We have a large conservation program with volunteers and staff who scan the beach for turtle tracks, a sign that a female has come ashore to lay eggs," Shaver says. "But sometimes, we can't find the nest. We call those 'stumbers.'"

Shaver's charges — Kemp's ridley sea turtles — usually come onto the beach for just 45 minutes during nesting, often on windy days. The wind can blow away the tracks, making finding the nest a challenge. After five hours of fruitless searching that morning, Shaver decided to try a new volunteer.

She called her fiancé, Stephen Kurtz, and asked him to bring their Cairn Terrier Ridley Ranger to the beach. Kurtz set Ridley loose, and within five minutes the little terrier zeroed in on a small stretch of sand. He looked up at Kurtz proudly, but Kurtz wasn't sure. Ridley had found a spot near some temptingly aromatic fish bones, so he took the dog back and tried again. Ridley returned to the same spot. On the third try, he pawed at the sand, revealing a turtle egg.

From then on, Ridley had the job. For his training, Shaver and Kurtz started by hiding treats, and Ridley was



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Cairn Terrier Ridley Ranger has a nose for locating turtle nests.

good at finding them. Then they moved on to turtle eggs.

Shaver and Kurtz took Ridley to the beach and let him watch her dig out eggs. He smelled the eggs and the sand. "We also took him to sites where the eggs had already hatched, and let him sniff the cavities," she says. "Then I took him into an incubation facility where I hold the eggs in containers within a building for protective care and reinforced the smell there. I let him sniff unhatched eggs and the refuse pile of eggshells."

Ridley understood what Shaver wanted. "When he gets

on the beach, he puts his nose to the ground, and he's all business," Shaver says. Since coming into service during the April-to-July 2007 turtle season, Ridley has not only located two stumpers, but confirmed several "false crawls" — tracks that don't lead to nests because turtles coming ashore never laid any eggs.

The Padre Island National Seashore on North Padre Island, Texas, is the most important nesting beach in the United States for the endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtles, and while Shaver doesn't

envision a future of dogs running around on the beach digging up eggs, she believes that dogs like Ridley could play an important role in finding stumpers and speeding up hunts in areas with multiple nests.

Shaver was so pleased with Ridley's progress that she and Kurtz got a new Cairn Terrier puppy last year. Shaver has high hopes that Kayleigh will eventually become as valuable as Ridley in helping to preserve endangered sea turtles.

Four-Legged Freuds

The 15-year-old boy sat slumped in the waiting room before his first psychotherapy session. He hung his head and folded his arms.

When Lois Abrams, Ph.D., stepped out of her office with her co-therapist, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel named Duke, the boy's eyes moved to the dog. Abrams surveyed the teenager. "Would you like to give Duke a treat?" she asked.

He nodded, and the spaniel trotted over, wagging his tail. Duke offered a paw to shake, then jumped in the boy's lap. He raised his head, looked up at his mother, and grinned. "He's really nice," he said. "I'd like a dog like this."

His mother burst into tears. "I haven't seen him smile like this in months," she told Abrams. "I can't believe it."

Abrams believes it. She sees this kind of reaction all the time when she works with Duke and Romeo, her psychotherapy assistance dogs.

"Cavaliers are comfort dogs, and unlike some breeds, they aren't threatened by direct eye contact," Abrams says. She first heard about the empathic little spaniels from a student in a course she was teaching at Pepperdine University's Orange County, Calif., campus.

A few years later, she found Duke, and began socializing the puppy by letting him greet clients. Abrams took Duke to obedience classes, then began training him for therapy with an animal behaviorist, desensitizing him to people experiencing intense emotions.

Duke and Abrams are a certified pet therapy team with the Delta Society, a leading pet therapy organization. Trained in crisis-response work, Duke also helped Abrams counsel victims of the 2003, 2007, and 2008 California wildfires and worked at the Ground Zero memorial in New York in 2002.

But Duke and Romeo impact the most lives at their daily workplace in Los Alamitos, Calif. Romeo, Duke's nephew, joined the family a few years ago to help Duke with his sizable caseload. The affectionate younger Cavalier specializes in adolescents and



Duke and Romeo specialize in comforting people at their owner's psychotherapy clinic.



young children. "Romeo loves toddlers," Abrams says. "In child abuse cases, sometimes a child that won't talk to a therapist will talk to Romeo."

Duke has a way of telling Abrams just how a patient is feeling. "Duke sits at the feet of people with anxiety," she says. "But with people who are depressed, he jumps up on the couch and sits next to them."

"When I realized what he was doing, I thought, 'Hey, this little dog knows things I don't know, with a few years of training. I'd better start paying closer attention to what he's telling me.'"

Therapists aren't supposed to touch their clients, but Abrams believes that because the clients can pet the dogs, they feel nurtured and safe in the office. "When Romeo rolls over and offers his belly, that's a sign of trust," Abrams says. "That really means a lot to some of our clients."