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Wonder Dogs to the Rescue

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Argus (foreground), almost 14 years old; Jackson (background), age four years Photo C. Dausman

If you met Ben Ho or his wife walking their shepherd dogs around the neighborhood, you'd think they were only pets. You'd be so wrong. The dogs - Argus, a thick-coated Bavarian Shepherd, and Jackson, an American Shepherd - are search and rescue dogs. They, along with Ho, are members of "WOOF," or Wilderness Finders Search Dog Teams.

According to its website, WOOF "is a unit of highly trained 'professional volunteer' dog teams on-call to the entire U.S. The volunteer service unit aids law enforcement in search, rescue, and recovery efforts. WOOF searches without charge to the person(s) lost or to the requesting agency."

Argus, Jackson and Ho have compiled an impressive record of assisting in wilderness searches for missing persons, and urban searches after natural and man-made disasters. The dogs are trained and tested for two years before setting to work; they have a useful work life of seven years. Ho has volunteered the last 20 years at sites and events as diverse as Hurricanes Iniki, Katrina and Rita, the Mexico City, Northridge and Loma Prieta earthquakes, and the Oklahoma City and World Trade Center bombings.

Closer to home, WOOF dog teams have been involved in rescue and recovery missions including the Oakland Hills Fire, a 2001 Highway 99 fatal accident, and searches for Lacey Peterson, Jaycee Lee Dugard, Sandra Cantu and Hassani Campbell. Last New Year's Day, search dog teams responded to a request for help to locate mushroom pickers missing for two days in Mendocino County.

Search dogs, and the people who train them, don't take the dogs' mission lightly. Although the breed may be Kelpie, Blue Heeler, Boarder Collie, Lab, Golden Retriever or Shepherd, each dog must have good health and temperament and a genetic predisposition for a soft mouth. You wouldn't want a search dog harming a small lost child. Trainers prefer to raise puppies, with six generations of pedigree to prove the pup's disposition and health.

Only one per cent of dogs are working dogs, falling into the police dog, guide/companion dog or Search and Rescue categories. Search and Rescue dogs must be intense but non-aggressive. Special training within Search and Rescue hones their skills for tracking, evidence retrieval, cadaver searches, water searches or avalanche searching. The dogs must be good athletes, and water safe.

Wilderness search dogs learn to allow themselves to be hoisted or lowered off a cliff face; some ride in or dangle from a helicopter for insertion into rough terrain. For certification, trainer and dog-partner must pass a timed map-and-compass search at 6,000 foot elevation within a square kilometer. "Suche!" (search), the trainer commands in German to his dog, all the while being intentionally distracted with incoming radio calls. Trainers are evaluated for fitness as well. They must carry a 45 pound pack and cover three miles in 45 minutes at a one mile elevation.

Ho is currently volunteer dog coordinator for WOOF, contributing by his estimate 400 hours a year in that position. An active reserve member of the Moraga Police Department since 1981, he is a retired Marine Corps officer and eye surgeon. He is most proud, though, of the legacy he's left in his children: one son a San Ramon fire fighter, another a doctor in San Diego, and a daughter who inherited her father's love of travel and devotion to the great outdoors.

Why would anyone leave a warm bed to go out in rainy, cold weather, all without pay? Ho's simple, brief answer: "altruism." Ho and his fellow rescue dog teams simply avoid the spotlight, exhibiting what he calls the Lone Ranger syndrome. "The important thing is reuniting the (lost) victim with his/her loved ones," he says. The search teams simply slip away while that happens.

To learn more about WOOF, visit its website: <http://www.searchdogs.com/home>, or visit PBS's Dragonfly TV online (<http://pbskids.org/dragonflytv/scientists/scientist36.html>) to see Argus in action.

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