

KARELIAN BEAR DOGS



Karelian Biologist Rich Beausoleil with Cash Savu and Mishka with treed bear



Officer Bruce Richards with Mishka

IN 2007 my wife and I were in a serving line at Washington State Wildlife Officer Mack Peterson's retirement dinner, when I was approached by a captain from the east-side of our state, who burst out; "Rocky was just killed!"

My first reaction was, "Wow! That was an awkward joke!" As it turned out, it was no joke. At that moment I learned Rocky Spencer, a longtime friend and working partner of mine, had been killed when he had walked into a helicopter rotor blade while trying to untangle two mountain sheep he had just net-gunned earlier that day. Little did I know, at that moment, my career would take a bit of a turn for the next eight years.

I was an enforcement officer, Rocky was a biologist, but together we had spent countless hours working together on bear and cougar issues in King County (which includes Seattle). Anyone who has pursued bear or cougar quickly realizes that good dogs are essential to a successful capture. Having no state owned dogs at the time, I often used my own yellow lab for tracking tranquilized

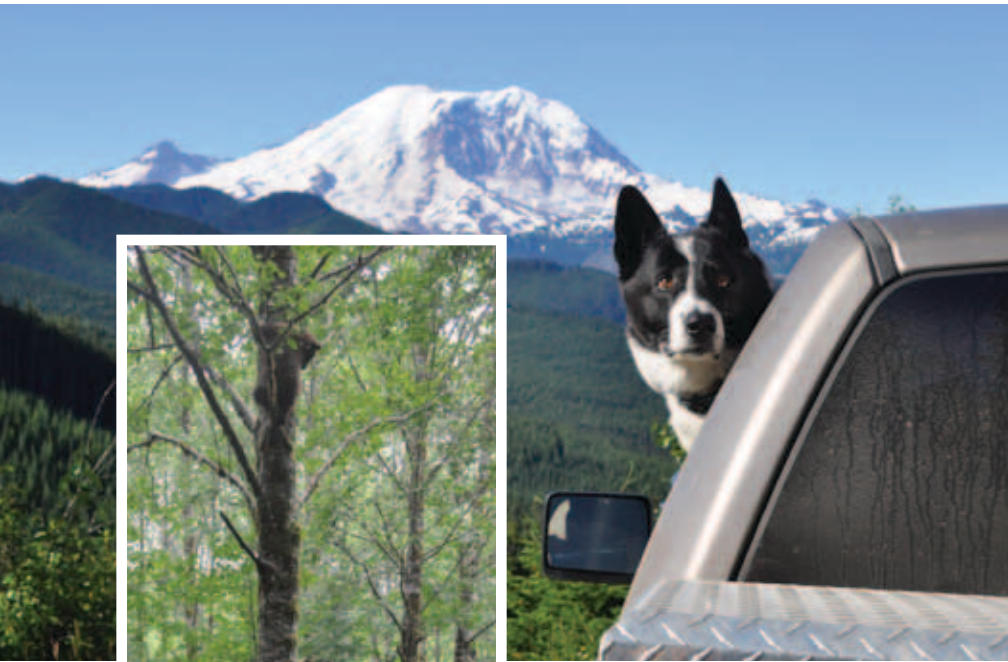
animals, much to the chagrin of those "above" me. Rocky wasn't satisfied with "making due" and in his quest for the perfect bear and cougar dog, Rocky eventually heard about Karelilian Bear Dogs.

In 2003, after months of research and the pursuit of funding, Rocky finally picked up a Karelilian Bear Dog named Mishka. Mishka came from the Wind River Bear Institute in Florence, Montana.

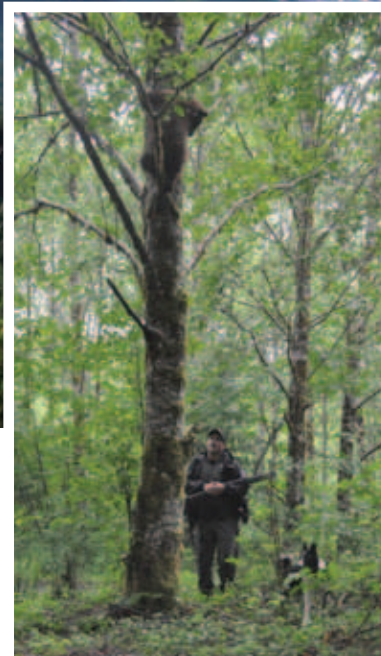
In 1982, while trying to save grizzly bear by using dogs to deter and repel them away from encounters with humans, Carrie Hunt (with the Wind River Bear Institute) found a dog breed which seemed perfect for the task—the Karelilian Bear Dog (KBD). Unknown in most parts of the world, the KBD has been bred and used by grizzly bear and moose hunters. Farmers in Finland and western Russia have used these dogs for centuries to ward off predators. The dogs have an innate sense on how to 'work' bear. KBDs weigh between 40-75 pounds. They are black and white in color, and are similar in shape to that

of a Husky. Since KBD's are intense, independent hunters, they do not necessarily make good pets. Wind River Bear Institute KBD's are now used in several states. Presently, only Washington and Alberta natural resource enforcement officers use the Karelilian Bear Dog.

After Rocky's death, many folks in Washington expressed concern about the fate of Mishka. I was asked to be his handler in the enforcement division for a pilot program of one year. I had been around the dog since he was a puppy. I had some big reservations about taking him on, as the dog was a handful. It wasn't until I went back to Wind River Bear Institute to get more training that I was convinced that a KBD was the dog our agency needed. It was there I met two Alberta Officers, now retired Officer Kirk Olchowy and Officer John Clarke (both from Blairmore District, Alberta). Both had been working for several years with their own KBD's. I became a true advocate of these dogs after listening to the officers' stories regarding how effective the dogs worked when summoned to deter bear, cougar, and sheep. It was abundantly clear that these dogs would work well in Washington State. In 2005 Officer Kirk Olchowy, of Alberta's



Above: Karelian Mishka and Mt. Rainier. Left: Karelian Officer Dave Jones with treed bear.



Sustainable Resources Fish and Wildlife Division, wrote a paper showcasing how effective the Karelian Bear Dog was when used in the field.

Using this research and information, regarding KBD's, my new canine partner and I were able to make 2 outstanding cases.

WDFW Officer Brian Alexander, had a large bull elk poached in the Olympic National Park. Brian had already gone into the park that fall with several park rangers several times trying to find evidence, but came up empty. By the time I had learned of the search for the remains of the poached elk, the snow was already too deep to return before the following spring. I was told the Olympic NPS had done grid searches the year before, involving 600 man-hours, but never found elk remains. When our opportunity to search the area finally arrived I put Mishka's working harness on and began the search. I was not at all confident we would find anything. The park ranger, Brian, and I all split up to work the downward slope of a very steep knife ridge. I was even more discouraged as I observed the incredibly rough

country we were searching. After only 15 minutes, I looked up to see Mishka digging down through some winter debris on a rocky slope. Suddenly the dog reached down, grabbed something, and then purposely ran down past me to show off. As he went by me, I was sure I saw the neck bone of an elk. I yelled for Brian and told him that I thought Mishka had just run by me with an elk bone. I scrambled up to that spot, dug down myself, and found two more pieces of neck bone, one having been cut through with a saw.

Brian later commented to me that "his heart leapt from his chest" hearing about the bone. I guessed he was tired of walking into this very tough country gaining no results. Brian later found a small bone, and called the dog over. The dog ignored him, but went down below Brian several yards, dug down through about 2 feet of winter debris, and came up with another neck piece with connective tissue....a possible DNA match! With the newly gathered evidence, the violator was found guilty in Federal Court. A large dose of credit, for this case, has to go to the Karelian Bear Dog.

Later that same pilot year, Officer Dustin Prater (who later became a dog

handler himself) called me up in the middle of the night. Two people had been reportedly attacked by a cougar south of Puyallup, WA. Both subjects, a man and his wife, were in the emergency room getting stitches to close wounds caused by a cougar attack. Mishka does not like cougar, and responds with hair raised on his back. We took him into the emergency room to see how he would react around the victims' clothing. To my surprise, Mishka did not react, but I had never had him in such a place, so I didn't overthink it. Dustin and I took the dog to the attack scene, and released him out into the dark with a bell on his collar. I could track him with the sound and my flashlight, but the dog seemed to be interested in chasing rabbits. This raised a flag to me, because he wouldn't be doing such with a cougar in the area. We walked on a mile or so, finally reaching the victims' house. We heard noises in the backyard, raised our flashlights over the fence, and right there on the porch was a white pit bull..... covered in blood!!!! It turned out the victims' OWN dog had attacked both he and his wife, and the husband was trying to blame a mystery cougar. If Mishka had not given me a reason to think the scenario wrong, there would have been six game wardens chasing a phantom cougar for weeks.

Although Mishka is not the department's first dog, there was never any real interest in having a dog program within the agency. However, due to the good work by Mishka, the agency decided to begin a KBD program. Currently we have six working dogs. Mishka retired at the beginning of 2015 after 12 years of service. Our program is also unusual because we incorporate two divisions, enforcement and the wildlife divisions. Biologist Rich Beausoleil handles two dogs,

Cash and Indy, Officer Nickolas Jorg handles KBD Colter, Officer Chris Mosezeter handles KBD Savu, Officer Keith Kirsh handles KBD Jax, and Dustin Prater handles KBD Spencer (named after Rocky Spencer).

Although the dogs fail in some aspects of the job from time to time, I have been on enough hound dog endeavors to know



that a dog is a tool, a great tool for game wardens, but dogs are not always going to get it right. Our dogs have helped tree several hundred cougar in wildlife depredation problems and have aided researchers in data collection. They have worked ten times that many bear issues. The list includes; garbage/fed bear problems, research, depredation issues, orphaned and injured wildlife, but these dogs are best known for trying to change behavior in bear that have been taught bad habits by people.

Most commonly, KBD's are worked with bear involving human conflict. Sometimes, only hazing is needed. When captured bears are candidates for release, we utilize on-site releases as much as possible, coupled with aversive conditioning. Sometimes that literally means on-site in someone's backyard. Many bear are transported less than a mile) to the closest forested area and the release is conducted there. This benefits the individual bear by staying within its home range where it ultimately has the best chance at survival (e.g. known natural food source and not being placed in an area occupied by unknown bears). The hope is, if captured early the behavior is corrected. The bear learns the danger zones within its own home range. Also, by not transporting and relocating long distances, staff can use that time more effectively to find attractants. This helps explain why the conflict occurred and perhaps prevent a repeat performance. Educating the local community about prevention also helps diminish bear problems.

Mishka made at least one big game case a year for me that I would not have made without him. Mishka found various body parts, or tracked animals where it never would have been found without the use of the dog's nose. KBD Colter even made a case for me while I was 'dog-sitting' him for Officer Jorg by finding the stashed head of an illegal spike elk.

What we didn't expect about the KBD program, was the overwhelming public response and support of the program. Washington's citizens are very supportive of non-lethal solutions for



Karelain Officer Dustin Prater and Spencer with poached elk

resolving human-wildlife conflict. The KBD's offer us that option. The KBD Program is 100% supported by private donations. The agency allows the use and the transport of KBD's, but the fund provides all the monetary support for care and field gear. Because of public interest, our KBD program has been featured on television countless times including all major news networks in Washington, Good Morning America, Nightline, Animal Planet's Dogs 101, and many more. Interestingly, the KBD's have allowed whole new avenues in talking with the public, and all the handlers have found people much more open to speaking with us, because dogs are fairly universally loved by the public. Our dogs are very people friendly and are not the conventional 'bite/drug' dog, so people are encouraged to mingle with them and actually become part of the program.

The Washington KBD program has been the most positive program for our agency that I have seen in my 41-years as a game warden. The KBD's help staff with tracking and radio collaring efforts for agency research projects. They find injured and orphaned wildlife. They help resolve human-wildlife conflict. Together we educate the public. They find remains of illegally taken wildlife. Some of the rarer, unexpected capabilities of the KBD's include finding a deceased hiker's remains when search and rescue teams were unable to. KBD Cash single-handedly captured a black bear involved in a rare attack on a human within 15 minutes of being on the scene

and helped restore calm to the local community. Washington KBD handlers are some of the few dog handlers in the country who get no extra pay for the work done with the dogs, but we have found that we had used a dog an average of once in every five days throughout the year, sometimes on two to three different issues in one day. Unlike hound dogs, one KBD is often able to accomplish what could have taken several dogs to do. Their versatility goes beyond one specialty, for instance

one dog can work a bear, tree a cougar, track a fisherman on a river, find evidence of game violation, and hold a school full of kids at rapt attention.

In closing there are some "lessons from the field" that should be shared. The KBD's are not like other tools we use in bear management. They are not equipment, cannot be "stored until needed", and the dogs cannot be transferred among staff. The socialization that occurs from birth at Wind River Bear Institute (the only facility we use and recommend), and throughout the dog's life, requires they not be used like a police K-9. People are partners and friends that are protected, and other dogs are not seen as foes. Also, not all biologists and officers should be considered candidates. It takes a huge commitment and handling skills; so an approach of putting tacks on a map where conflicts occur and blindly assigning a KBD would be a huge mistake. The commitment of being a KBD

handler is enormous and requires a 24 hour, 7 days a week, 365 day commitment. We are in our infancy in many aspects of our program, but with the right person as a handler, and with supervisors who

can envision the future positives of a dog in their area, by thinking outside the box, the program has unlimited potential to help officers/biologists and "wildlife"!🐾



By: WDFW Officer Bruce Richards (retired) and WDFW bear/cougar specialist Rich Beausoleil (with the wildlife division of WDFW).