

When Fire Comes,
Rescuers Round Up Pets
by Stephen Knapp
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On a recent Saturday, nearly two dozen people gathered at InterCanyon Fire Station No. 3 for an important training exercise. Many were issued two-way radios, others wore stout protective gear, and many sat in specialized vehicles they'd driven from their homes in Bailey, Conifer and elsewhere in the foothills. At shortly after 9 a.m., the addresses of several homes in the Homestead neighborhood were issued, and small teams raced to find them. On arrival, each team took possession of a small plush toy, carefully recorded every detail of the plaything's location and appearance, and whisked it off to theoretical safety.

If that sounds like a fool's errand – and the exercise's comical aspects weren't lost on any of the participants – its purpose was deadly serious. The procedures rehearsed on stuffed animals might well save the lives of flesh-and-blood creatures when calamity comes calling.

Wildfires have always been a fact of life in Colorado's arid foothills, and armies of firefighters, law enforcement officers and other emergency personnel have ever stood ready to protect the lives and, whenever possible, the property of people living in the danger zone.

Unfortunately, in times of greatest crisis, official resources can't always be stretched to secure the safety of household pets trapped behind fire lines when endangered subdivisions are evacuated and absent residents can't return for their animals. To help supply that deficiency, a group of uniquely qualified mountain-area residents banded together four years ago to form Animal Evacuation Volunteers, a nonprofit organization dedicated to getting wildfires' most vulnerable victims out of harm's way.

Not surprisingly, AEV coalesced from the ranks of Colorado Mountain Mushers, the area's most prominent sled-dog racing association. Apart from a natural love for dogs and unparalleled expertise in animal handling, mushers also possess the specific tools their self-assigned mission requires. "We're already equipped to move and board large numbers of animals," says Mark Stephens, who, with his wife, Debra Su, helped co-found AEV. "Mushers are the logical ones for the job."

The group first emerged on a purely informal basis in response to the Hi Meadow fire that scorched the dry forests south of Pine Junction in 2000. "Park County called and said, 'We need help,' " says Dick Nichols, a founding member of AEV. With their dog trucks largely idle during summer months, several mushers rushed to the scene and volunteered their time and equipment to rescue beloved pets from the fire zone. "We moved quite a few animals, and afterward the county animal control people said, 'You guys gotta' get organized.' "

By the time the next wildland fire broke out, local officials knew exactly whom to call. As it happened, AEV's real trial by fire was a monster, and the organization's true value – and unswerving commitment – became abundantly clear.

In May 2002, the Snaking Fre broke out in the foothills south of Conifer, followed by the Black Mountain Fire on June 2 and, finally, the horrific Hayman Fire burst over the range on June 8, forcing the evacuation of tens of thousands of area residents and stranding countless animals behind the fire lines. With panicked homeowners cut off from their property and pleading with Jefferson and Park county animal control officers to rescue their animals, officials called on AEV, which managed to deploy more than a dozen willing hands

and several vehicles on dangerous missions of mercy.

"One time we were headed down toward Pine to get all the critters out of this subdivision, and the sky was covered with smoke and there was this weird glow over everything, like nothing was its real color," Nichols says. "All I could think of was, 'What am I doing here?' "

Nichols stayed the course, though, and wound up rescuing numerous dogs and cats, plus about 50 chickens that would have otherwise been doomed. Other small creatures rescued from the Hayman Fire and transported safely to shelters in Fairplay, Florissant and Golden included rabbits, birds and at least one goat.

Because AEV has no legal authority to enter an empty home to rescue a pet, whether a homeowner has granted them permission or not, a sheriff's deputy must accompany the volunteers on every foray. While not troubled by that sensible measure, many AEV mushers are uncomfortable with the need for firefighters to shepherd them in and out of hot zones.

"It's their job to keep us safe while we're out there, but it takes a trained firefighter away from the fire line where they're needed most," explains AEV president Chuck Cubbison. To help free those guides for the more immediate duty of fighting the fire, about a dozen mushers have now completed basic wildland fire training through local fire departments. "Instead of tying up a firefighter to look after our own safety, our volunteers can actually increase the number of trained personnel on the ground," Cubbison says. "They don't need an escort to go behind the lines, and they have another level of usefulness."

From its modest, musher-heavy beginnings, AEV now boasts some 25 regular members, many of them former animal control officers and others with animal handling experience, and most of whom turned out for the stuffed-animal drill. Even if no real animals were in danger, the exercise was extremely useful nonetheless, a chance to get familiar with radio protocols and emergency chains of command, and to practice compiling the documentation necessary to ensure rescued pets are recovered by their owners quickly. "It's a chance to work the bugs out of the system before a real emergency happens," Nichols says.

While rescuing pets is AEV's primary mission, their hope is that, by doing so, they're also protecting pet owners. "People love their pets, and some of them will try to get into the fire zone to save them," Cubbison says. "If they know that trained volunteers are working to rescue their pets, pet owners might be less likely to put their own lives at risk."

To learn more about Animal Evacuation Volunteers, visit www.animalevac.org, or call 303-838-4645 or 303-697-9152.