

Service dogs get special treatment at UT Vet Hospital

Free eye exams offered as part of national event

By Mike Blackerby

Saturday, May 15, 2010

Obviously, reading an eye chart wasn't an option for Apache and Schatzie.

The German shepherds were two of about 15 service dogs who received free eye examinations Friday at the University of Tennessee Veterinary Hospital.

The exams were offered at the UT animal hospital for the first time as part of the national American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists/Merial third annual National Service Dog Eye Exam Event.

"They get cataracts, glaucoma, corneal ulcers and retinal diseases, just like people," said Dr. Diane Hendrix.

The pair of German shepherds were model patients as Hendrix performed ocular exams on the search-and-rescue dogs, which are used to detect human remains and find lost people.

Schatzie and another rescue dog recently used their uncanny sense of smell to recover a drowning victim submerged in 230 feet of water.

Obviously, Hendrix said search-and-rescue dogs, police dogs and seeing-eye dogs need to have excellent vision.

Service dogs - which selflessly provide independence for their masters - typically include German shepherds, golden retrievers and Labrador retrievers.

"These dogs are providing service and support, and it's important that they have good vision," Hendrix said. "Their vision is not as sharp, and they can't focus up close as well as humans, but their vision is much better than humans' at night."

The dogs first had their eyes dilated before Hendrix examined them with a device called a slit-lamp.

"It's like a \$9,000 flashlight with a magnifying glass," she said. "It lets us look at the cornea back to the lens."

Hendrix then examined the back of the dogs' eyes with a retina headset.

Pictures of the dogs' retinas, which more resembled a psychedelic poster from the 1960s with the squiggly lines and vibrant colors, were shown on a monitor.

Thankfully, both Apache and Schatzie were given clean bills of health.

"These dogs have been so well-bred that you hope through their lines that they won't have these retinal diseases," said Hendrix.

The dogs' owners and handlers, Roy and Suzie Ferguson of Sevierville, were appreciative of the opportunity to have their animals examined.

"Our dogs have routine vet checks every six months, but having access to this degree of specialty is incredible," Roy Ferguson said.

"They're too important to not catch anything that might come along. These dogs really are incredible."

Mike Blackerby is a freelance contributor to the News Sentinel.

University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine Small Animal Clinic student Catherine Gibson, right, talks to Sam, a seizure alert service dog for Bonnie Dinkins, 6, second from left, before performing an eye exam as part of the third annual ACVO/Merial National Service Dog Eye Exam event. Bonnie is joined by her sister Emilee, 9, left, and her mother, Connie, third from left.



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