

Hardworking dogs are offered free eye exams

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Golden retrievers, Labradors, German shepherds and bloodhounds: They're all breeds typically associated with search-and-rescues and crime-fighting.

Not poodles.

Mishka is giving service dogs a different face. The 2-year-old standard poodle and her handler, Jenny Logan of Tampa, were recently certified by the Sarasota Search and Rescue team to work "wilderness finds." Mishka also trains with Bay Area Recovery Canines, where she's learning to detect human remains.

"All dogs have the nose to find something," Logan says, "but the difference between a regular pet and a search-and-rescue dog is training the dog how to tell you when they've found something. That's important."

Search-and-rescue dogs rely on their eyes, ears and noses for their vital work, so keeping them healthy is especially important. For the second year, Logan and Mishka will take advantage of the ACVO/Merial National Service Dog Eye Exam Event, which offers free eye exams during May.

"It's a wonderful thing to have offered to you," Logan said of the event offered by the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists. "It is preventative medicine - if anything is wrong and we can catch a condition early, we can treat it. And there's no charge. That's phenomenal in this day and age."

It takes about two years of training before a dog is ready for a real search-and-rescue, and the dog must continue training for at least 16 hours a month. Logan started working with Mishka when she got her as a 12-week-old puppy.

"I picked Mishka because I love the breed and - while they are not used for it as often today - they are wonderful retrievers."

Last year, Mishka's eyes got a clean bill of health from veterinarian E. Dan Wolf, an ACVO member with the Southern Eye Clinic for Animals in Tampa.

A board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist, Wolf plans to participate in the eye exam event for his third year in a row.

All active working dogs certified by a formal training program or service organization are eligible.

The ACVO event "allows me to provide service to a population that sometimes goes underserved," says Wolf, who saw a handful of service dogs during the 2009 event. "The working dog population is essential to those people who need service and for search and rescue."

Whether or not your dog is gainfully employed, it's important to detect eye problems early. Wolf recommends taking a look at your pet's eyes every morning and check for these signs of problems:

1. Redness in the white part of the eye.
2. Squinting.
3. Cloudiness of the cornea (the clear front of the eye through which we can see the eye color).
4. Any mucus in the eye.
5. Any change in their vision. The pet may not pay attention to things as easily, may not see as well in the dark or may

stumble over a step, etc.

If you know a service dog that could use a free eye exam, register at www.ACVOeyeexam.org beginning Thursday. Once you sign up, you'll get a list of participating clinics to contact.

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