

Karelian pups will be trained to chase bears

TAHOMA - After eight years of using paint guns and humans to coax bears away from homes, Tahoe's BEAR League has called on some four-legged help.

Anya and Dmytro, 9-week-old Karelian bear dogs who arrived in Tahoe on March 28, will assist BEAR League Executive Director Ann Bryant in getting bears back into the forest.

"I'm getting too old to crawl under houses," Bryant said, referring to her method of waking sleeping bears. "They will help me with my job. ... The three of us will be a team."

This summer, the black and white furry puppies will start 18 months of training to detect and coax bears, chase them back into the forest and learning boundary lines. Originally from Finland and Russia, the Karelian bear dog is fast, athletic and extremely intelligent, according to Bill Fantozzi, owner of California Karelian Bear Dog Kennel.

"They have an instinctual characteristic that will work with bear, moose, wild boar - all wild game," said Fantozzi, who donated the dogs to the BEAR League. "They are very effective, especially because of their courage and bestial instincts. They jump and play with the bear with their tail wagging."

California Karelian Bear Dog Kennels trainer Bill Bates will not only teach Anya and Dmytro to track and chase bears, but to respect other wildlife. That means they will not chase squirrels or other creatures, which is important to Bryant, who rehabilitates wildlife in her Tahoma home. Bryant currently lives with two rats, nine squirrels and her pet porcupine, Marvin.

"If they can help the bear and the community, how can you say no to something like this?" said Bryant, who was reluctant to become attached to another dog after her dog died years ago. "I said I would never have a dog again. ... They [the puppies' mom and dad] didn't chase the squirrels or bother the porcupine. They will work out with the other wildlife I work with."

Bates, who has trained dogs for more than 20 years, will teach the dogs bear calls, Russian commands and how to do their job without a handler present. He will come to Tahoe with Anya and Dmytro's mother and father, Grizzly and Laska, to help in the training. Bryant will also take the pups to Los Angeles, where Fantozzi's kennel is based.

The dogs will don orange vests with the BEAR League's logo while they are out working. Bryant said she is excited about Tahoe's new addition and hopes the community will be, as well.

"They are living with me, but these dogs belong to the community," Bryant said. "They are our dogs, not my dogs. They are here not only helping bears, but helping people."