

Call of the wild

Alaska

In the rugged wilderness of Alaska, people can easily become lost. Thankfully, a trusty pack of dogs and their human handlers are ready to help should something go awry.

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On a blustery day at the Glen Alps trailhead on the outskirts of Anchorage, Erin Boklage commands Tucker, her border collie and lab mix, to “load up”. The dog dutifully leaps into her lap. The obedience of Tucker and the rest of the pack sitting next to him – Topo, Kira, Chispa, Finn and Garrus – is exceptional, though not unsurprising, given their line of work.

These are the K9s of Alaska Search and Rescue Dogs (ASARD), a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1984 to help locate lost hikers, skiers and adventurers, as well as to assist in rescue missions after avalanches. “We never know the exact situation so we cover all bases,” Boklage says. Training as many as four times a week, the team works on disciplines such as track and trail, and avalanche rescues.

When they’re not honing their skills or on a mission, members of ASARD lead normal lives. The volunteers have day jobs, while the four-legged friends are family pets. Search missions benefit from the relationship between dog and handler. “Owners understand their dogs,” says Boklage. “They know the different barks, how to read body language. That level of trust and communication is key out in the field.”

Over the years, ASARD has assisted in finding many lost people and has been among the first responders after avalanches. “Knowing that you played a part in bringing someone home keeps us all going,” says Boklage. In recent years call-outs have declined in frequency, perhaps as a result of technology’s greater role in rescue operations. However, especially in the more remote parts of Alaska, technology cannot be viewed as a failsafe. This is why ASARD and other similar groups continue to be prepared. “We’re a small part of the rescue puzzle,” says Boklage. “But we do what we do because we love the dogs and we’re ready to help in any rescue mission.” —

Erin Boklage
Studying audiology in Chicago might not be a conventional starting point for a leader of an elite volunteer rescue team but that’s precisely ASARD unit leader Erin Boklage’s pedigree. She moved to Alaska in 2011 and now balances her day job restoring people’s hearing with being the state parks’ go-to dog-team leader. “We are some of their first responders in wilderness environments,” she says.

1. **Becky Germain**
Field support.
“Educating herself in wilderness safety.”
2. **Topo**
English shepherd and border collie mix.
“Loves mountains.”
3. **Erin Barker**
Support member.
“Data analyst by day.”
4. **Tucker**
Border collie and lab mix.
“Training in human-remains detection.”
5. **Ray Dinger**
Treasurer and field support member.
“Runs the books.”
6. **Kira**
Australian shepherd.
“The youngest member of the team.”
7. **Heather Bell**
Operational avalanche team.
“Helps the team to follow scents beneath the snow.”
8. **Chispa**
English shepherd.
“A six-year-old veteran.”
9. **Amanda del Frate**
Assistant unit leader and operational wilderness team.
“Dedicated in the field and office.”
10. **Finn**
Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever.
“Training in avalanche rescue.”
11. **David Disselbrett**
Member at large and field support.
“An experienced set of hands.”
12. **Carrie Aleshire**
Secretary and support member.
“Keeps ASARD organised.”
13. **Garrus**
Rough collie.
“Another new pup.”

