





Lost in a Blizzard of Canine Confusion

By Randy Johnson • Illustration by Amy Sarris

As I'm again looking forward to winter weekends of skiing and hiking in the High Country, I'm reminded of a major lesson I learned last winter while hiking with a friend and her dogs. Losing two dogs in a blizzard was quite an experience.

I love dogs, but dog lover or not, I lean toward leashing dogs on the trail, especially when National Park or other rules require it. I do that mostly to protect wildlife. In too many places, unrestrained domestic animals are essentially human-subsidized hunters.

Beyond not wanting to see dogs harm wildlife, or scare and inconvenience other hikers, I'm a firm believer that leashing your pet is the first step to protecting them. That came through crystal clear last winter.

I was off on a hike with a friend of the "they need to run" philosophy-in calf deep snow near the Blue Ridge Parkway. We were setting off on the Tanawha Trail, near the town of Blowing Rock, north of Grandfather Mountain-when two of the three dogs took off howling and chasing something away from the trail and into a snow-squall blurred rhododendron thicket miles wide. We hollered, we called, but their barking receded into the distance ... then stopped. Only the dog that "needed to be leashed" was still with us.

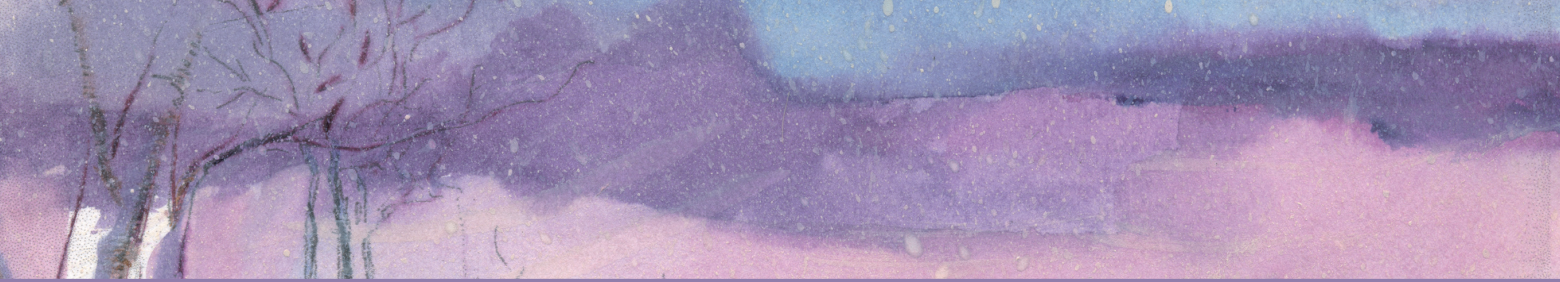
In the quiet of this late afternoon scene-with 20 degrees

heading down to 10-it dawned on us both that, if bad got worse, neither of these dogs might survive the night. What to do? Scream, of course. Scream yourself hoarse. We bel-lowed on and on-to no answer and to no avail. Now what? Well, they surely ran to the nearest road. They'd be picked up, dropped at the nearest humane society. They had tags. There'd be a phone call, a happy ending.

But it was getting colder, and the one dog on hand was going berserk-it was her son who was missing. So, back to the car we went, slogging through snow, away, we feared, from housedogs suddenly without a house in deep winter snow and bitter cold.

Back at the car, we wanted to go both directions to check the roadsides, but from one direction, there were cars spinning back up from below-a major clog/crash had blocked the now impassible dirt road we drove in on. With only the Blue Ridge Parkway (actually, the more isolated) side of the area open, we went that way, scanning the roadsides, reaching the Parkway, and calling across the barren beaver bog that our rhodo forest emptied into. No yelps. No gleeful barks of recognition. Should we leave? Should we watch the mercury plummet and the snow fall, poised by the phone? That's what you, or I, would probably do, right? If we were sufficiently cold and over it? Or would we?

Well, we went back to the trailhead and pondered.



The stars of the story. From left to right: Pepper (full name: Pepper T. Pupper); Earl (full name: Big Earl-don't ask, the story of how he got that name is longer than the tale of being lost in a blizzard); and Greta (believe it or not, Big Ear's mother). Pepper and Earl made the escape. All are adopted alumni of the Watauga Humane Society shelter.

Then we packed some extra stuff in a pack, gave the remaining dog a warm bed in the car, and started over. We walked the trail-and when we got to the place where the two dogs had disappeared-we found their tracks, stepped off into the wasteland, and followed them.

We kept trying to cell phone unreachable friends. It slowly dawned on us that our best chance was to track the dogs to wherever the hell they were-even if it meant using the headlamps we had with us.

That's when things got interesting. Have you ever tried to track two dogs chasing another animal? Two animals circling their prey, in ever more involved circles, through vegetation and terrain perfect for four legs but impassible for two? It was hell.

We moved on, wetter, colder, deeper into drifts, to where we both started wondering how our soaked clothes and exhaustion would play out at midnight when we decided that we couldn't find the dogs.

Branches slapped us, bruises brought winces, and welts came up under torn, very expensive, high-tech fabric. We had an hour of daylight left, it was snowing harder, and we had to head back. We circled twice around the same area, screaming. Oh yes, did I forget screaming? We were calling every 30 seconds, the entire way. I was so dry and so hoarse. And then we both arrived together at the junction of two dog trails, at a stream and a steep bank and just collapsed. The trails disappeared in the dusk. Falling snow hissed down through tightly curled rhododendron leaves. We screamed some more and just sat down in the snow-numb from the waist down.

We looked up from our stricken state-and there, at the top of the bank, sitting together, shivering in glazed-eyed calm-were the dogs. They'd leaped up the bank, obscuring their tracks, as they snapped out of "chase mode," I guess.

Then they'd lay down and done nothing, even while looking down on us, as we were calling their names from 15 feet away. Why hadn't they yelped, or barked? Or come to us? Were they hypothermic?

We leashed them, then led tethered dogs through a bona fide Southern Appalachian rhodo hell for more than a mile on hands and knees and back to the car at dark.

It was a wonderful reunion-mother and son-an engine again spewing heat. While the car warmed up, I stepped back to the dirt road in the dark, frankly, shaking with exhaustion and distress. I've been involved in quite a few "recoveries" in the mountains, and more happily, helped in successful rescues of people with injuries, hypothermia, and frostbite. This experience had brought a number of dire scenarios back to me.

I wondered-suppose there had been no snow on the ground to track the dogs? Would they still be out there?

As I stood there, another car rolled up and a window came down. "Is this the way to Hawksnest ski resort?" the driver asked. "It is under better conditions," I said, "but not now. I'm going another way right by Hawksnest on my way home. You're welcome to follow me." And off we went. Me home. Them night skiing.

People take great pleasure in hitting the trails with kids and canines-and I'm one of them. But for both circumstances, there are sound rules to follow. Last winter added to the experiences I draw on when I consider those guidelines.

I promised myself after that scary winter incident on what we call Lost Dogs Loop that I'd share the story in hopes it helps someone-and their best friend-on a future winter hike. Maybe it'll make a difference this very winter.

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