

The dogs know the way to carry the sled

Scouts learn how to care for dogs, then take a ride

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If you have five big dogs that yearn to put on harnesses and pull sleds, and if you want to teach children and adults what dog sledding is all about, where do you go every weekend?

You go to the Hereford Zone.

Catherine and Eric Benson, who live in Baltimore and own Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, know North County is famous for having snow when it's raining to the south. It's also famous for an unpaved trail that stretches from Hunt Valley into Pennsylvania.

Every weekend from September through April, they pack up one Alaskan and four Siberian huskies and head for the Torrey C. Brown Rail Trail to offer rides. If the trail is snow-packed, great. If not, the dogs can pull a sled on wheels.

Just last Saturday, they introduced 11 Boy and Girl Scouts from Dundalk to the art of dog sledding.

"Come and meet the dogs," Catherine Benson said to the Scouts, who gathered behind the old Monkton train station, on the trail. "They will want to give you face kisses."

Sure enough, 4-year-old Sobo planted his front paws on Samantha Barnhouser's shoulders. She closed her eyes as Sobo licked and licked.

"Samantha wants to be a vet, so she's loving this," said her mother, Kimberly Barnhouser, the Girl Scout leader who organized the adventure after seeing an ad in a children's magazine.

The Bensons introduced the other dogs, Zoe, a 9-year-old Alaskan husky; Okemo, 3, also a Siberian husky, and Acadia, a 7-month-old Siberian husky pup. T-Bone, 7, a Siberian husky-sheltie mix, is shy with people, so he stayed in the truck until it was time to help pull the sled.

During the next hour, nine Girl Scouts and two Boy Scouts helped slip harnesses on the dogs, practiced putting booties on to protect the dogs' pads and learned about nutrition and the correct dog sledding commands.

"It's not 'mush' like in Disney movies, it's 'hike' to get the dogs going," Eric Benson told the youngsters. To turn the dogs to the right, he yells "gee." For left, it's "haw." And to have the dogs ignore disturbances along the way, it's "on by."

The Bensons need a base of about 6 inches of packed snow to use a snow sled, so they brought a dry-land sled, called a rig or a gig, for the Scouts.

It is basically a seat on wheels, with space in the back for Catherine or Eric to stand and steer.

The Scouts separated into groups and walked on the trail to three spots where they waited for rides.

"Here they come! Here they come!" the Scouts in the middle group on the trail yelled as the sled carrying 8-year-old Carmen Brune, who wore goggles and a bike helmet, quickly approached. Catherine Benson called "easy" and "whoa" and the dogs came to a stop so another rider could climb aboard.

"It felt really bumpy," Carmen said. "But it was really cool. The air is really cold on your face."

After her ride, Maggie Carey, 9, said the dogs ran faster than she had expected. "It was definitely fun," she said.

People running on the trail didn't seem too surprised to be passed by a dog sled.

"We're out here all the time," Catherine Benson said. "We train during the week and do programs on weekends at different spots on the trail."

Catherine Benson said she and her husband began Maryland Sled Dog Adventures in 2007 after spending several years training their own dogs.

"It went from a hobby to a business," she said. "We are particularly interested in teaching people about dog sledding, and this trail is the perfect place to do it."

Catherine Benson is an attorney who now gives dog-sledding programs fulltime. Her husband, Eric, teaches at the University of Delaware in its bioresources engineering department and helps out on weekends.

In addition to the three-hour program, for which Scouts earn a dog-sledding patch, Maryland Sled Dog Adventures offers "Yappy Hour," a one-hour program during which adults and children get to ride the rig, as well birthday parties and classroom presentations.

For details and prices, go to www.marylanddogsledding.com, or call 443-562-5736.

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