

FROM PET TO PATIENT

**Taking a dog in
the backcountry? Be
ready to carry it out.**

By Karen McCall

Tua was no greenhorn when it came to outdoor adventuring. She had lots of experience in the backcountry: hiking, skiing, and canoeing—or sitting in the boat, anyway. She was also bear savvy and well-behaved.

"She had been on many trips," says Michelle Christensen-Toews about her six-year-old Belgian shepherd. But one calamitous backcountry trip was to change Michelle's adventuring-with-dogs protocol forevermore.

The trouble struck on day five of a rugged hiking trip from Haines Pass, B.C., to the Yukon's Wheaton Valley, navigating through lush alpine meadows, overgrown horse trails, and Highlandsque boulder fields. As they approached the headwaters of the Takhini River, the crew, including Michelle and her husband, Paul, their friend Malcolm, and four-legged Tua, reached a steep valley requiring them to scramble down a series of rock slabs. No problem for the capable and obedient canine. Tua would wait for Paul to lower himself down a boulder, then she would jump into his arms and he would put her down. All was well until Tua deviated from the routine, jumping off a 15 m rock before Paul was down.

"We both tried to stop her," explains Michelle. "As soon as she hit the ground she yelped."

Tua had landed on a sharp flake of rock, (gory details to follow), exposing several centimetres of flesh almost all the way around her back paw. "So, the fur had separated and

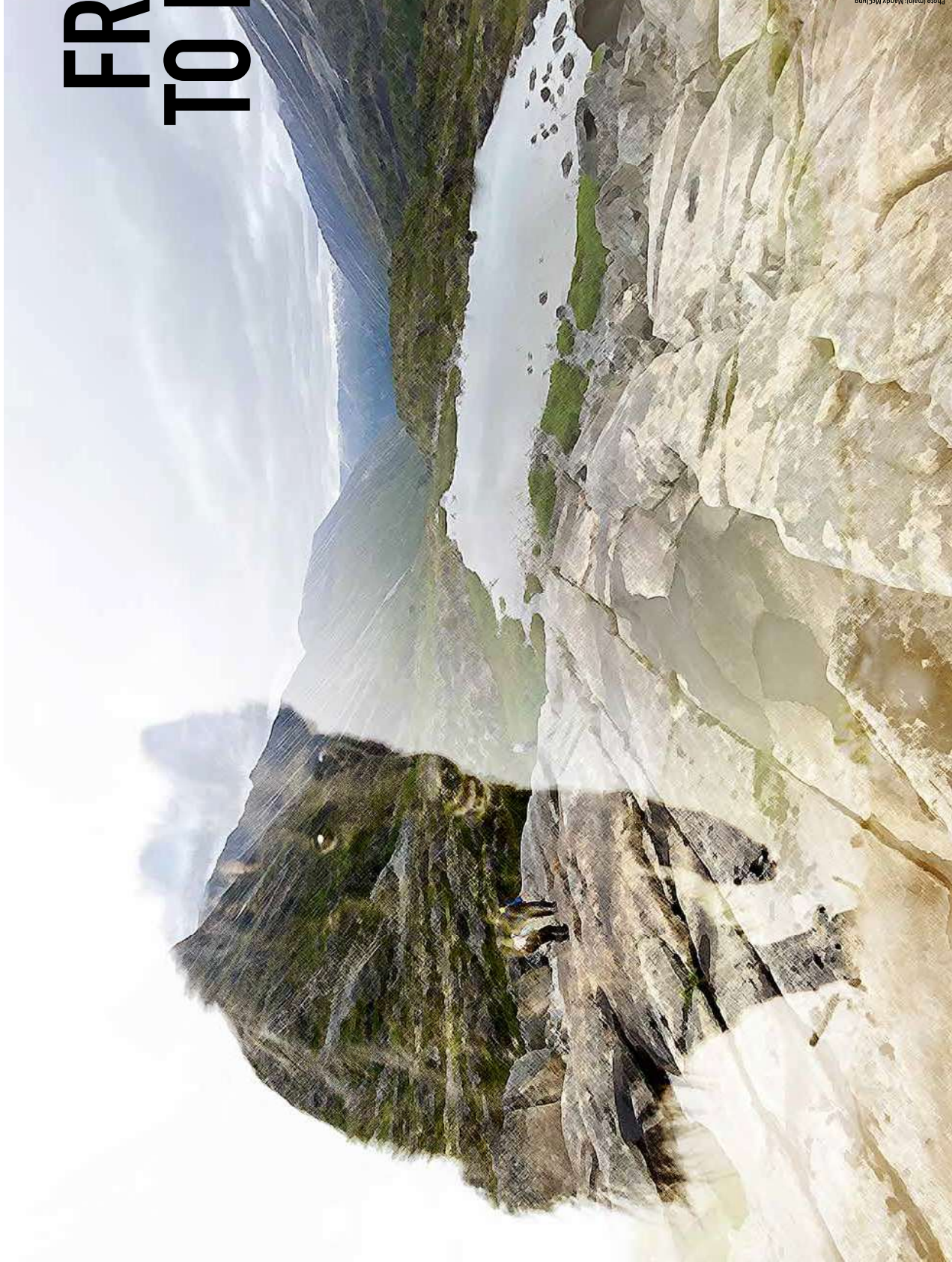


Photo (main) Mandy McCall

"IT WAS PURE TORTURE."

there was only this little piece that was maybe half a centimetre on the back where it was still attached," says Michelle.

As experienced outdoorspeople, Michelle and Paul were prepared for a first-aid situation. Michelle was a paramedic, and although she hadn't stitched anyone up before, she had a suture kit and a strong stomach. With Paul holding their shocked pooch, Michelle pulled the fur together and used pliers to push the needle through her dog's tough coat 14 times. T'ua didn't make a sound during this ad-hoc operation. "It was a non-sterile application of sutures," says Michelle, "and poorly done because I'd only ever seen people do stitches before."

Since they didn't have a satellite communication device to arrange an airlift out (this took place before carrying one was the norm), and they were more than halfway to an exit point, they continued their hike. T'ua couldn't walk, so they moved most of Michelle's gear into Paul's backpack (which was too narrow to carry a dog and too long to trade with Michelle) and loaded their 18-kg patient into Michelle's pack.

"And then we started bashing our way out," says Michelle, recalling the backbrush along the upper reaches of the T'akhini River and its tributaries. T'ua was a quick learner. The shepherd put her head under Michelle's armpit to protect herself from branches, but when she tired of backpack life, she awkwardly leaned against Michelle's neck whilst pushing against her bearer's back.

"It was pure torture," says Michelle. And she doesn't mean for T'ua, although the wounded hound wasn't faring well either. Despite the dose of human antibiotics Michelle was rationing out according to T'ua's body weight, her foot became infected—they could smell it.



Above: Michelle with T'ua, on their descent into the T'akhini river valley. Shortly after this photo was taken, the trip took a turn for the worse.

Three hellish days later, they approached the turquoise-coloured Primrose Lake. From there, it's still a two-day hike to Annie Lake Road, but, by coincidence, they knew a friend who was flying into the lake that day. If they were lucky, they just might catch the back-haul flight.

They were a couple of kilometres from the floatplane dock when they heard the recognizable hum of an aircraft. Paul put his 6'2" frame in motion, galloping along the lakeshore to flag them down. Meanwhile, Michelle, nursing a trashed hip flexor, struggled on with Malcolm, who was now carrying T'ua.

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Q: WHAT DOG BREEDS ARE BEST FOR THE BACKCOUNTRY?

A: I think people would be surprised at how versatile a lot of dog breeds are. The only ones that are not your best hiking companions are the brachycephalic collection of breeds—dogs with short airways like pugs and bulldogs. They aren't best for hardcore adventures because they are a little more likely to have breathing complications. Giant breeds are also not your best bet because of reduced endurance and joint longevity. Other than that, it's more about conditioning. People wouldn't necessarily assume their small breeds are capable of super adventurous stuff, but they absolutely can when trained for it. I have a 10-lb. chihuahua mix and she can do almost anything my larger dog can. We do up to 25 km on a trail, mountain biking, and running."

—Britt Pearson, *FawkesFrat Adventures*

Most of the dog injuries Britt Pearson sees are more benign than what T'ua experienced. But since taking dogs on off-leash hikes is her day job and ultra-running with her own four-legged friends is her hobby, she knows a lot about dog care. The owner of FawkesFrat Adventures says the most common issue she sees are paw-pad injuries when dogs run on surfaces they aren't accustomed to, particularly after a winter spent on snow. Injuries can happen close to home, on rough gravel roads, or further afield on scree or abrasive rock and can result in bloody, torn-up paws. Although not as severe as T'ua's injury, a damaged paw pad still takes Rover out of commission until it heals.

Another injury waiting to happen out the back door as well as in the backcountry is a run-in with a porcupine. Pearson has seen dogs (not in her care) that had quills in their face, muzzle, neck, and chest. "[The dog] looked like a porcupine, they had so many quills sticking out of them." This can be serious if a quill works its way into the dog's lung cavity. "There's definitely situations when porcupines can be life threatening," says Pearson.

Completing the trifecta of serious dog injuries one hopes never to see in their best friend is a tear in the cruciate ligament in the knee—similar to the injury experienced by humans. "That can be pretty dramatic and traumatizing because if it's a full tear a dog can't support themselves at all and you're entirely responsible for getting that dog home," Pearson says canines that are overweight are more susceptible to a ligament tear.

The professional dog hiker says that while some injuries are flukes, there are actions owners can take to prevent mishaps, like training their dog to have good recall and stay close. Her own barometer for taking a dog on a trip is about training. "It's going to entirely depend on what you've done to prepare and if you've done those things with your dog," she says.

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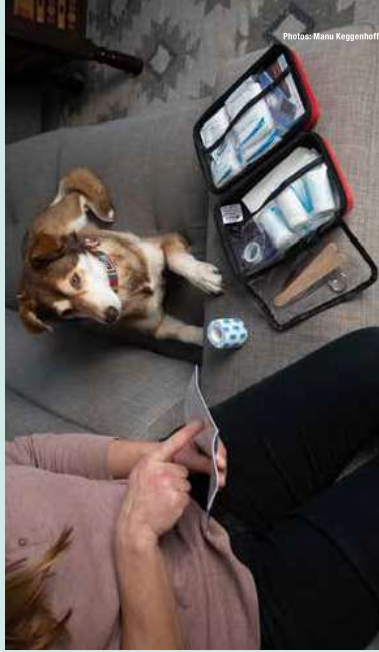
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Tua's tale has a happy ending. Paul reached the float plane on Primrose lake and secured their short flight back to Whitehorse. They went straight to the veterinarian, where Michelle was told her stitches were fine; the only thing they could have done differently was to give Tua a full dose of antibiotics. They did that, and two weeks later Tua was running around, back to her usual happy self. Her humans, however, were changed after that trip.

"We changed our philosophy entirely," says Michelle. No longer did they take Tua—or any of their future dogs—on big expeditions. Weekend trips, sure. But no extended trips.

"You have to be ready to carry your dog out," says Michelle, who has put her money where her mouth is, "and deal with whatever you're confronted with."^Y



DOGGIE FIRST AID?

Canine first-aid courses teach prevention as well as what to do if a dog eats poison or stops breathing. Two courses offered in Whitehorse earlier this year by L.S. Ky Health Canada First Aid had more than 40 (human) participants. For those who missed out, Top Dog Training Academy is teaching a one-day course in June.

First-Aid-Kit Basics

- Tweezers
- Vet wrap (self-adherent)
- Gauze
- Antiseptic wipes
- Booties



Photos: Manu Kegenhoff

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