

ANIMAL RESCUE FLIGHTS

Where love takes wing. By Amanda Bryan

Blind dachshund puppy, Apollo, sniffs around Wytheville, Virginia's Mountain Empire Airport (MKJ) before heading to his new Connecticut home.

It was a snowy night. The flight had been canceled several weekends prior due to bad weather. Having determined it was now safer to fly, the pilot loaded his cargo and took off on his mission. When he landed, receivers of two Shar Peis were enthusiastic, greeting him with home-baked cookies—these are the moments you cherish when you're volunteering as an Animal Rescue Flights ARF (ARF) pilot.

A national organization based in Connecticut, ARF is a volunteer team of GA pilots saving unwanted animals destined for euthanasia, and educating the public about the importance of spaying and neutering to decrease overpopulation across the United States.

After realizing the GA community could help save hundreds of unwanted pets' lives by moving them away from overpopulated areas to ones where they could have a better chance at being placed in adoptive homes, Julia Ryan, along with friend and mentor Clark Burgard, created ARF in March 2008.

"We love flying, and it's even better when we can put our skills to work for animals in need," says Ryan, who, like Burgard, is a VFR private pilot and aircraft owner.

ARF pilots have flown 300 animals more than 75,000 nautical miles. There's a network of 400 pilot volunteers and 130 "ground crew" spread across the states as well. Most of the transports are from the Southeast northward or Midwest eastward, always from shelters or rescue sites. Using a relay team of five to six pilots, many of the flight plans cover distances more than 1,000 nautical miles.

ARF pilot Law Wright says of his peers, "These aren't pilots sitting around talking about where they flew for lunch yesterday or last weekend; they're pilots actually completing missions that make them smile the entire following week."

Ryan and Burgard say they're grateful for the camaraderie and community support. Also, working alongside pilot organizations such as Arizona-based Flying Paws and ground transport teams such as South Carolina-based Freedom Train has given ARF invaluable resources to help even more homeless animals.

While not ARF's main function, it's been known to organize events in support of animal shelters. It was one of the organizers for August 2009's "Georgia Puppy Caravan," likely the largest animal rescue operation Georgia has ever seen and covered by all the major news networks. ARF pilot Brad Childs led the task of raising funds for 22 tons of dog food, which was delivered to the Peachtree-DeKalb Airport (PDK) by air and truck (see www.AnimalRescueFlights.org/GeorgiaPuppyCaravan).

As part of the event, ARF pilots and other rescue organizations also enjoyed the world premiere of *Rescue Ink Unleashed*, a six-episode series about animal rescue that first aired September 25 on *National Geographic*. One episode includes ARF assisting





ARF pilot Ted Dupuis loads dog food destined for Georgia animal shelters.



ARF co-founders Clark Burgard and Julia Ryan traveling with dachshund Molly to Upstate New York.

with the transport of a dog fighting ring “bait dog” from Kentucky to Long Island, New York.

To top off Georgia Puppy Caravan, ARF helped empty one Georgia shelter, and either drove or flew nearly 200 animals to safety in the Northeast region. “ARF transports a lot of dogs,” says Childs. “If there’s a mission available and weather permitting, we’re willing to fly every weekend. We’re not going to say ‘no’ to an animal in need.”

“Week in and week out, ARF flight coordinators take enormous amounts of information from various sources and organize it into a logical plan of action for the pilots, senders and receivers,” adds Ryan. “They complete flight plans with as much efficiency as weather, winds and aircraft allow.”

ARF has set up a thorough communications network for volunteers. Many transport requests are sent directly to ARF. Flight coordinators monitor forums on www.petfinder.com and www.yahoo.com for pet relocation requests as well.

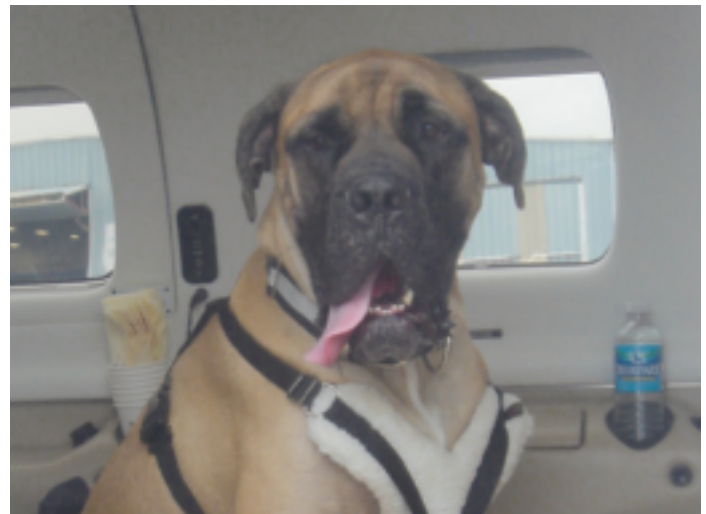
When a transport is chosen by one of the ARF flight coordinators, a flight plan is created using proprietary flight planning software (ARFSYS) and posted on the ARF “Mission Board.” This is where pilots can volunteer for legs in the plan and even make route suggestions.

Typically, the organization’s pilots fly single-engine Pipers and Cessnas but Cirrus SR22, Mooney, Aztec, Beechcraft and even a King Air are on its aircraft roster. “We also have a handful of commercial pilots who put their flight benefits to work, such as the case with ARF commercial pilot Scott Peters. He picked up a 5-pound rat terrier puppy in Michigan and flew her all the way to Jacksonville, Florida, for a life-saving surgery,” says Ryan. “So I guess you can include Boeing and Airbus on the ARF aircraft list as well.”

A bonus to volunteer pilots is that most flights are tax-deductible, making it a little more affordable for hobby pilots to fly more often.

Thus far, the organization has transported only cats and dogs, although ARF occasionally receives requests for transferring rabbits, geese, and pet rats and snakes. “Dogs generally make better passengers than humans,” ARF pilot Ted DuPuis adds. “They’re curious at first, but as soon as we take off, they’re typically ready to curl up and take a nap.”

With high hopes for 2010, ARF’s founders want to double the number of animals relocated in 2009 and have each pilot member complete at least one mission annually. Although



99 percent of the flights are already tax-deductible, the organization is currently applying for 501(c)3 status.

ARF plans to make a few improvements in the coming months, such as enhancing its ARFSYS flight planning software, therefore allowing more missions to be posted quicker. Also in the works is a series of food banks at strategic airport points nationwide to help maintain local shelters’ food supply.

“Moving unwanted pets around and donating food is only a Band-Aid,” concludes Wright. “The real solution is for pet owners to spay and neuter their animals. It can be done for as little as \$50, and it really saves county taxpayers a lot of time and money. And euthanization due to animal overpopulation will be no more. That’s our goal.” ➔

For more information, visit www.animalrescueflights.org or e-mail pilots@animalrescueflights.org.

