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Rules of the trail

Canine etiquette class teaches hiking for hounds

By LAUREN RUSSELL , Chronicle Staff Writer

There are probably few activities more fun for a dog than hiking. Fresh air and wildlife abound, and sometimes an owner will free a pup from that pesky leash, allowing for unrestricted stick or squirrel chasing. But nothing quite disrupts the peaceful, contemplative mood of a hike for humans like an over-eager canine bounding through the forest, crashing into fellow trekkers and fighting with their furry friends. For this, veteran dog trainer Nancy Tanner has a solution: a canine trail etiquette class. Tanner incorporated the three-week class, called Ready, Set, Hike!, into her Paws and People dog training service in 2008. Dogs and their owners learn commands that enforce trail right-of-ways, methods of recalling dogs that take off down the trail and wilderness safety applicable to both multi-use areas and the backcountry. “The hiking program is becoming one of our more popular classes,” Tanner said. “It teaches responsibility and etiquette on the trails, like what to do when you and your dog encounter a packing horse on the trail, for example. It’s a really fun class for both owners and dogs.” A three-week session consists of weekly evening sessions at Tanner’s Paws and People facility and weekend hikes, on which attendees get to practice new skills. Overnight camping trips are also offered. At a recent Wednesday evening class, instructor Prairie Lee led four pairs of masters and dogs in warm-ups, which consisted of repeating the commands “go left,” “go right,” and “go behind,” while throwing sticks in the corresponding directions. The exercise sought to get the pets accustomed to making room on the trail for other hikers.

“It’s ideal to get the dog to your side, out of the way of oncoming traffic,” Lee said, rewarding Mesa, her black and white collie mix, with a treat for obeying. “Hiking is a game—training your dog is a game. I think of each lesson as a trick.”

After warm-ups, Lee instructed participants to work on recalls, developing a noise to call a dog back if it makes a break for it. She suggested establishing a fun noise, like a kiss sound or a “yip,” rather than the dog’s name.

“Your dog’s name is their power word in their vocabulary,” Lee said. “They want to associate it with coming toward you and being rewarded, but what we’re teaching should be normal behavior.”

Michelle Aranda struggled a little to get Harper, her large, 6-month-old Akbash puppy, to pay attention to the drill.

“She has the opposite problem of most dogs in that she won’t do mindless stuff because her breed is a guarding dog, and she’s very smart,” Aranda said while tugging on her lead to refocus Harper, whose blond, black-snouted Akbash pedigree is linked with guarding Alpaca herds.

Aranda said she already hikes with Harper, who is pretty good on the trails but likes to join other hiking parties occasionally.

“The reason we’re here is that she used to run off with other dogs and owners,” she said. “This long leash [referring to the 20-foot leads used in the lessons] is awesome, because it gives her her own space and creates a 20-foot wall between us.”

Hilary Parkinson, who has a leash and bag of feed attached to her belt loops with a carabineer, said the lessons have been valuable for her and her 2-year-old brown border collie Hayduke, or Duke for short, whom she rescued from a shelter.

“When we’re hiking and there’s a mountain bike coming, I’m worried he’ll get in the way,” Parkinson said. “We’re in the learning stages. He still requires treats.”

When dogs get restless in the woods, Lee says, stop the hike and do a few drills to get them to behave.

“I tend to leash up every now and then on my hikes to check up,” Lee said. “I have her to ‘sits’ and ‘downs,’ then we’re on our way and she can go play.”

Lee concluded the Wednesday session with a lesson about trapping, a potentially fatal hazard for dogs.

“Trappers bait them with rotted meat, and they can either trap dogs directly or attract a dog with the smell and cause them to set off down the trail,” Lee said as she demonstrated how to release two different types of traps.

Wilderness safety is highly emphasized in the class, and all of the instructors are certified in wilderness first aid, just to be prepared for the group hikes. Both dogs and participants are advised to be in good shape, since the group treks elevations with vertical gains of over 1,000 feet.

The next three-week hiking class begins in December; visit www.pawsandpeople.com for more information.

