



SPOTLIGHT ON RESCUE

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We are pleased to share with GRCA members the story of "Skidder." This Golden puppy was lost and alone for ten months during a northern Michigan winter. Only the resolve and commitment of several dedicated rescue volunteers saved him.

Against All Odds

by April Hakaim

I am the proud co-founder of Golden Treasures Golden Retriever Rescue, based in the Cleveland, Ohio area. An event has taken place within our rescue that I must share.

In May 2011, our program received a call from a local humane society. It seems that a backyard breeder, someone they had helped a couple years ago, was again breeding Golden Retrievers. The humane society knew because a litter of nine eight-month-old puppies were unsocialized and living in a lean-to shed in the backyard. The chances of them being adopted through their shelter were slim. We were asked to help. We took in the litter and mom; the humane society took dad because he was more socialized. We provided all necessary veterinary care for the puppies and mom and all went to foster homes for socialization and the beginning of training. After several weeks, the puppies made great progress with socialization and they were placed in forever homes. Although we don't usually place dogs out of the state of Ohio, we make exceptions when the applicant meets our standards and we think we have a good match. A family that lived in Michigan near Lake Huron was such an applicant, and they drove to Ohio to meet "Skidder" and brought their other dog with them. Everyone agreed that this was a good match and Skidder went to his new home in Michigan. But as the family pulled into the driveway at the end of their four-plus hour drive, they opened the door and Skidder bolted out. That was in June 2011.

Almost immediately upon our program learning that Skidder was missing, two of our members made the drive to Lake Huron in an effort to locate the dog. His new family had been putting food out and had glimpses of him now and then, so it was known he was still in the area. We first contacted the dog warden to alert him of Skidder's escape. We then brought Skidder's mother to the area in an attempt to lure him to us. Skidder was staying in an area between two ravines that we came to call "Big Ravine" and "Small Ravine." We spent two

days walking the area with his mother. We only caught a brief glimpse of him in one of the ravines. We went back to Ohio unsuccessful.

We were able to rent a property next to the "Big Ravine," but there were no accommodations so we bought a tent and camping supplies. The area was rural and most houses were used as weekend homes. We bought a live trap and traveled to Michigan every five days staying for three to four days at a time and did this for the next four weeks so that the live trap could be set. We quickly discovered that Skidder only came out at night, so days were spent knocking on the doors of all the houses within two miles of where he had escaped and walking the beach and ravines looking for signs he was still in the area. Our nights were spent in the tent listening for the jingle of the tags on Skidder's collar and the door of the live

(continued on page 112)



Briget Wolfe, Skidder and Sandy Strebler can relax together after Skidder's capture

trap closing. We heard the jingle of Skidder's collar several nights, but he never went into the live trap. All that was caught were raccoons and possums and, luckily, no skunks. Once again we went back to Ohio without success.

Then we had a special portable dog pen constructed with a one-way door. We again brought Skidder's mother, "Roxy," and "Benson," one of his brothers to Michigan. We thought the familiar scent of the only family he knew would draw him out. It was mid-July by this time and there were swarms of biting flies, along with temperatures during the day in the 80s. We were all miserable, but our thoughts were, "Let's hope Skidder is somehow able to find relief from the heat and the flies." During the morning we walked Roxy and Benson throughout the area and in the afternoon when the flies and temps became too much, we all found relief in Lake Huron. At night the cool breeze from the Lake cooled things down to the mid 60s. Roxy and Benson were placed in the dog pen each evening in the hope that Skidder would appear and go through that one-way door to reunite with his family. Soon the jingle of the tags on Skidder's collar alerted us to his presence. His mother and brother began to whine. But Skidder did not enter the pen that night nor the next night. After four days we went back to Ohio, again unsuccessful.

We talked to several dog behavioral experts, other rescuers and veterinarians to get advice, opinions, and ideas. We did a mass mailing, enclosing a "LOST" poster with Skidder's picture and a posted reward of \$1,000, to all nearby residents and local veterinarians. Unfortunately the relationship with Skidder's adoptive family became strained and they chose to return legal ownership of Skidder to our rescue program and discontinue any assistance with our efforts to capture Skidder.

We continued to drive back and forth to Michigan whenever our work schedules and family responsibilities allowed, each time searching during the day and sitting quietly at night listening for signs of Skidder. We continued to use the dog pen and live trap, putting strong smelling canned food inside for bait. We started putting out stuffed toys with his litter-mates' scent on them. It was now August and we needed something more, but what?



Siren Miner

An Internet search turned up a device used to catch large animals with no harm done. The device was a net launcher manufactured by Advanced Weapons Technology. We told the company Skidder's story and were told their product would work. They directed us to a YouTube link showing the device being used to catch a domestic dog. This looked promising, but we needed to be within 30 feet of Skidder and have good aim. We ordered the launcher and the company gave us a discount. Practice was necessary and we used a very large stuffed dog. Sandy Strebler and Briget Wolfe went to Michigan with renewed hope. They spent five nights sitting in various locations waiting to hear the jingle of Skidder's collar, hoping they were near a path he traveled. On their last night even although it was extremely dark, they saw a ghostly figure move across the top of the bluff and could make out the shape of a dog and the faint glow of Skidder's blonde fur. Briget aimed the net launcher and waited for him to come closer. He stopped 20 feet from her, eating the food they put out. Briget shot the net and hit the target. But the net did not completely capture Skidder and he was able to break away. He could be heard stumbling but in the darkness they couldn't locate him. By the time they zeroed in on him with flashlights, he escaped from the net leaving it torn and tangled. Suddenly they realized they did not hear the jingle of his collar. Skidder could now travel around silently. Again they returned to Ohio without success.

A friend offered to loan us three wildlife cameras that were located on the property of a sympathetic retired couple that was willing to help. It was from those cameras that a pattern of Skidder's travels could be established. The rest of August and part of September were spent sitting up at night with the net launcher and days were spent walking the area. But the second chance with the net launcher never came.

It was now the end of September and summer was coming to an end. A sense of urgency overwhelmed the rescuers. "Could Skidder survive a winter out here, living in the wooded ravines next to Lake Huron? Could we continue the search?" Although it became harder to ignore the "What Ifs," the efforts to capture Skidder with the dog pen and the net launcher continued. In late October it became too cold to sleep in the tent and sit out all night. Just as despair was about to take over, the retired couple who had allowed us to use their property now offered us a warm bed within their home so that the efforts to capture Skidder could continue. Now the rescuers were able to sit outside for three to four hours at a time, each with hand warmers strategically placed under many layers of cold weather clothing, knowing that a warm house and bed would be available at night. The search was continued until late November.

In late November it was necessary to suspend the efforts to capture Skidder. The retired couple offered to put food out for him every night and there was relief in knowing he would have some food. Eighty pounds of dry food and three cases of canned food were left for the retired couple to use.

However, during November, December and January, day trips to Michigan occurred to view the pictures from the wildlife cameras. Although the rescuers did not speak these words to each other, silently each looked for Skidder's body as they traveled the roads in Michigan and as they walked the ravines.

(continued on page 114)

The search for new ideas of how to keep tabs on Skidder's activities and how to safely capture him continued. In mid January, we went to Michigan with a new idea. It was still too cold to sit out at night and the day trips to check the wildlife cameras were costly and time consuming. We went to ask permission of the retired couple to install on their property cameras that were equipped with night vision and motion sensory devices. The cameras could be viewed live over the Internet. The couple was all for it as by now they were very committed to Skidder's capture. This new technology allowed Skidder to be seen every night making the same trek across their property. He was still alive and the hope that he could be brought home was too.

By March, Skidder's nightly patterns had been observed for two months. It had been ten months since Skidder escaped and, thankfully, it hadn't been the harshest of winters but spring was not far off. Skidder had been by himself for ten months. And spring, during the mating and whelping season for other species, is an especially vulnerable time for a young pup on his own. Something must be done *now*. Golden Treasures learned from another rescuer in Ohio that there was a humane trap designed specifically for canines. And one of the veterinarians working with Golden Treasures had one. It's called a "Collarum," and the veterinarian lent it to us.

Again the trip from Ohio to Michigan was made. It was March 17th, but the stay this time could be only for one night. The Collarum was set in the direct path Skidder traveled nightly. The retired couple's home provided the warmth as the cameras sent images to the computer screen. Would Skidder come by tonight? Would he take the bait? At 2:15 a.m., Skidder was on his usual path. He headed straight for the Collarum and he immediately picked up the scent of the bait and tentatively approached it. Then he suddenly turned and walked away, not to return that night. The rescuers went home heartbroken.



Mccauley Puppy

Two weeks later Briget and Sandy tried again. It was April 1st – yes – April Fools' Day. This time they had two nights. The Collarum was set. The first night Skidder was not seen and the worry was pervasive that something had happened to him. Soon it was 2:30 a.m. on the second night and still Skidder was not seen. The feeling of failure was consuming. But a few minutes later he appeared and approached the bait. This time he was not tentative - he pulled at the bait. *We had him!*

Briget and Sandy sprinted down to the beach. He did not growl, bark or whine. Nothing. He just stopped and turned into a big marshmallow in their grasp. Not wanting to take the chance of him getting away, they carried a crate down to the beach. Skidder willingly went into the crate and the crate was carried up the sandy bluff and loaded into the car. Skidder was captured on April 3, 2012, at 2:37 a.m.

Yes, Skidder is worth all this effort. They all are.

Unbelievably, after ten months of 600-mile round trips, thousands of dollars spent on capture equipment, a tent, sleeping bags, cameras, a custom-made pen, not to mention gas and oil for the vehicle, *Skidder was finally safe*. Remarkably, his weight was not terribly low. He had fleas and ticks and he was filthy and matted, but alive!! Here are a few of the odds he beat:

- He wasn't hit by a car, even though he was living on a narrow strip of land between Lake Huron and a heavily traveled highway
- He wasn't attacked by coyotes, which we observed on our wildlife cameras
- He didn't let hypothermia take him
- He didn't venture onto the thin ice of the lake and fall through
- He didn't starve
- He didn't get sick

"Awesome" was the general reaction from everyone who knew what this rescue program had been trying to do.

"Unbelievable" was another word used to describe his capture.

But, when you stop to think of it, this story is not just a story of a remarkable dog. It's also a story of the remarkable resolve of a group of volunteers in general and of two women in particular, who never gave up.

And because of Golden Treasures Rescue, Skidder has beaten the odds. After a few days in quarantine, he was soon in a permanent home, getting on with his life. The program gave the \$1,000 reward to the retired couple for without their kindness Skidder would not have been captured. But this couple had yet one more kindness for Skidder's rescuers: they returned the award saying that Skidder's capture was enough of a reward.

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Note: Sandy Strebler, Briget Wolfe and April Hakaim have made their contact information available to all Golden Retriever rescue programs with their offer to help should a similar situation face another program. (CJA)