

Rapu

Rapu has now been Department of Conservation (DOC) certified for over a year and recently passed his first yearly re-certification, something he will need to do for the next three years and every three years after that. We have been working as a team searching out Miramar's last few rats and providing assurance of absence in areas considered rat-free. This leaves the Miramar team free to continue their work in other important areas. It is said 90% of the cost (and effort) of an eradication project is in the last 10% of animals removed as the last few rats often prove to be extremely wily as experienced by dog handlers on the Lorde Howe eradication project.

What does it take to get into this work? You need to apply to DOC through the Conservation Dogs Programme (CDP).

I often hear "my dog likes to hunt rats—s/he could do that!" While most dogs can hunt (whatever they are encouraged to hunt), the work is not so much in the target but rather in obedience and avoidance of non-target species. It takes thousands of hours to train a dog to the level of obedience required by the CDP, including not taking interest in or picking up the scent of non-target species such as rabbits, birds, mice and cats to name just a few of the obvious distractions. This training will continue throughout the dog's lifetime. Our dogs need to be introduced from an early age to as many different stimuli, such as loud noises, water, and roads so that we can work in various situations or travel in various craft without fear of the dog losing focus or becoming distressed. The dogs need to be able to be in their crates comfortably alone for at least a couple of hours and are not allowed to travel in vehicles unless they are contained in a crate or specifically designed cage.

Does Rapu kill the rats? No, very rarely does he get the chance to catch a rat, his job is to indicate the presence of rats. If he is tracking a rat or finds but cannot access a rat I take a GPS (global position system) location and a note of his behaviour and give it to the Predator Free Wellington team who send staff in to add devices (cameras, traps, chew cards, or bait stations) to the area.

Is he a pet at home? While Rapu does get a lot of family attention (he loves cuddles on the sofa) and generally lives inside the home like a family pet he can't play certain games like a pet dog is able to because it may trigger responses that are not suitable in the field. This includes pouncing on movement. This would prove disastrous if we were working around endangered species such as lizards or may distract his attention in the field to mice for example.

We have to be extremely careful to watch Rapu's attention when on the property or even in the house as it's in his nature to fixate on something and I have harnessed this ability by training him with his ball to encourage a strong prey drive. This play must be carefully controlled and requires him to perform a task before getting a reward. He also needs to control his impulses and I have achieved this by making him wait for a release command before he's allowed to run for the ball. This may save his life if for example he picks up the scent of a rat across a busy road.

As we have two dogs at home, we can't let them walk off leash together unless carefully monitored, this is because our other dog could easily lead Rapu's attention to other stimuli such as possums, rabbits, cats or birds. We try to walk in areas where we are unlikely to come across rats or other possible distractions, though Rapu does know the difference between working and leisure walks. What was once a leisurely stroll with the dogs can become quite stressful as I need to keep a careful eye on them.

Rapu isn't encouraged to play with other dogs, although I do allow it occasionally with specific dogs I know. When we are working in areas such as around dog parks I need his focus to be on the job at

hand. He has proven to be extremely focussed even when approached by other dogs, but this has taken a long time to achieve.

Does he ever get time off to just be a dog? Rapu is a dog all the time, he loves nothing more than to hunt, it's in his nature as it is for all dogs. and he becomes very excited to put on his jacket and muzzle as he knows he's about to go hunting. He is however quite a different dog when we go out for a walk casually and isn't wearing his work attire (though he will always be keen to find a rat at any time). He seems to know when he's allowed to roam further and play with our other dog, he also runs up to people to greet them, something he is discouraged from when working.

Rapu continues to help me around my home and neighbouring properties, and I can often tell the morning after a rat has visited our property by his behaviour, helping me to respond accordingly by freshly baiting or moving my traps.

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