

# Lifeguard Dogs— To the Rescue!

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photos by Alamy

It was August 2021 in a seaside town in Italy. Fourteen friends were having a fun day at the beach. They paddled their rubber dinghies and inflatable mattresses out into the water. The sea was calm and the day was sunny. Then, without warning, everything changed.

## Help!

A strong wind sprang up. The water became choppy and rough. Waves tossed the dinghies and mattresses about. The group included eight children aged between six and twelve. They were already 100 metres from shore. Now the wind was blowing them out to sea. They were in trouble! All they could do was wave and call for help.

Luckily, people on the shore spotted them. Lifeguards rushed into the water, and they did not go alone. Three lifeguard rescue dogs went with them. Their names were Eros, Mira and Mya. On the beach, hundreds of people watched. The lifeguards and the dogs swam towards the people who were being swept away. Just 15 minutes later the three lifeguard dogs were towing the dinghies, and the people in them, safely back to shore.



## Italy's water rescue dogs

Italy is the only country in the world where dogs are used as lifeguards. The idea started when a man named Ferruccio Pilengal was out boating with friends. He took his big, shaggy Newfoundland dog along in the boat. Its name was Mas. Newfoundland dogs love the water and are powerful swimmers. At the end of the day, Mas leapt into the water and paddled for home, happily towing the boat and the three people in it.

Pilengal thought, *Had my friends and I been in trouble, big, shaggy Mas would*





*have saved us.* From that day on Pilengal and his friends began training Mas to rescue stranded boat owners and swimmers. That was 1987. Today, The Italian School of Water Rescue Dogs has over 300 rescue dogs. They keep watch as lifeguards on 48 of Italy's popular beaches and lakes.

## **Basic training**

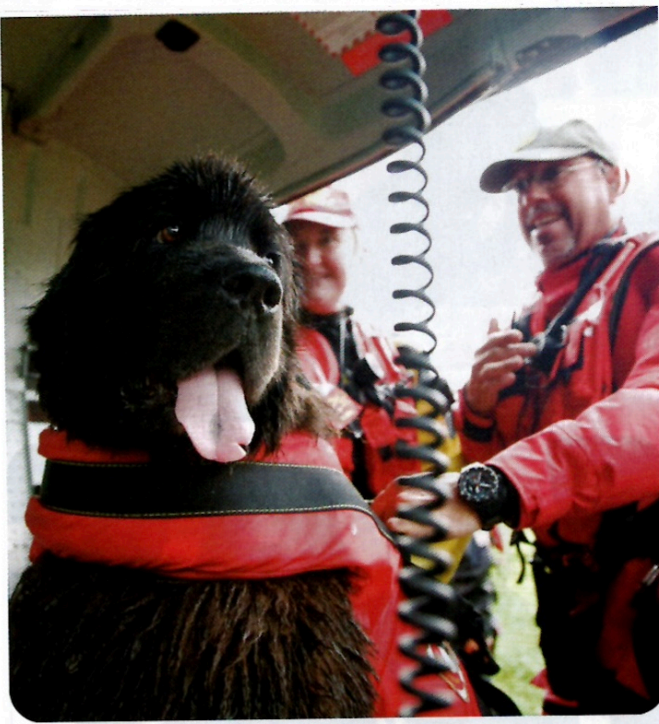
The most successful lifeguard dogs are large Newfoundlands, Labradors and Golden Retrievers. All these dogs are powerful swimmers, and by instinct they want to help people in distress. Also, these dogs have calm natures which is important in noisy and high-stress rescues.

Training starts early in the dog's life. First it is taught to obey commands, and then to swim side by side with its trainer. Next it is fitted with a canine life vest, and practises helping swimmers



in distress. The dog is taught to swim in circles around the swimmer while a human lifeguard goes to the person first. The lifeguard lays the swimmer onto their back, with their face above the water. Then the dog comes in. The lifeguard grabs the dog's harness and the dog tows both back to shore.





### **Advance training**

Next, the dogs are trained to rescue swimmers on their own. Again, the dog swims in circles around the person until the person is calm enough to grab the harness on the dog's back. If a swimmer is unconscious, the dog is taught to take the person gently by the wrist and pull

them to shore. But the last part of their training is the most amazing.

The dogs are trained to leap into the water from moving boats. Also, they must be able to tow a boat containing 30 people for up to two kilometres. Finally, they are taught to jump into the water from a hovering helicopter. Most dogs are taught to do this by another well-trained dog who leads the way.

### **Coast Guard dogs**

The Italian Coast Guard now also uses Newfoundland dogs to rescue people in the water. Newfoundland dogs are big enough and powerful enough to support two or three people at one time. From instinct they know which water currents will carry them back to land. Plus they have water-resistant coats and webbed paws, all of which helps them swim.

Every year Lifeguard Rescue Dogs save between 20 and 30 people in Italy. All lifeguards in Italy are volunteers and their rescue dogs are much-loved, family pets. ■

