

[From Summer 2008]

Russell, the Refuge's Newest Law Enforcement Officer

By Kristin Jalm and Rebecca Funk

The newest member of the Law Enforcement division at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge is pretty young. In fact, he's only 16 months old. But in dog years, he is closer to 20 years old. He's Officer Russell, half of the new K-9 unit at the refuge. Russell, a German Shepherd, is from Slovakia, a country in Eastern Europe, and only arrived at the refuge a month ago. His handler is Jim Fair, one of the Law Enforcement officers at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

In an interview with Jim Fair, he gave us a little bit of the background about this new program at the refuge. Although there are other K-9 units with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, stationed primarily at major ports of entry, such as Miami and Baltimore, there are less than ten K-9 units with the refuge system in the United States. Russell is actually the first K-9 dog with Law Enforcement in Region 5.

So why was Russell brought to the refuge? Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge is one of the most visited refuges in the United States. His main purpose on the refuge is to patrol for narcotics and missing persons. Because of the amount of traffic that enters the refuge each year, Russell will greatly aid Law Enforcement in the search for missing persons and narcotics, as well as facilitate the resolution of such issues.

Jim and Russell were first paired when Jim traveled to Sanford, North Carolina, where they both underwent intensive training, specializing in narcotics and trailing.

Russell has actually been in training since he was a puppy; the training in North Carolina was more focused on handler training. One of the major components that Jim had to learn was the commands to which Russell responds.

Although many people have German Shepherds as pets, there is a clear distinction between Russell and other dogs. Although refuge policy does not allow pets to enter the refuge, Russell is allowed, because he is a service dog. Service dogs, whether they are seeing-eye dogs or police dogs, are allowed to enter the refuge. Russell's presence at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge has been widely accepted and supported. And, in the short time that he has been here, he has proved himself to be a valuable member of our staff.