

*Rio opened my eyes to the joys of solo adventuring in the outdoors.*

# Trail Dog

**W**hen I was standing at a fork in the road, my dog showed me the right path to take. It was a figurative fork; I was actually sitting in a camping chair on the “beach” of a mountain lake. At the time, Rio was just a 6-month-old Labrador Retriever mix who was gleefully chasing balls and digging holes in the sand.

Earlier that day, my pregnancy test came back negative, and I'd been crying. My husband suggested a trip to the lake to clear our heads. I'd gotten myself so twisted up by longing, grief, and misery over a recent miscarriage and unsuccessful fertility treatments that I barely recognized myself.

As I watched Rio race around the lake, sometimes pausing to roll onto his back and kick at the bluebird sky, he seemed like the embodiment of freedom and joy. I took a deep breath and felt myself uncoil. I resolved to be more like my dog.

“I'm so relaxed,” I said to my husband, Bryan, who grinned with relief.

I stopped fertility treatments and prioritized outdoor adventures with Rio. Our adopted hometown of Durango is a recreation wonderland snuggled in the mountains of Southwest Colorado. Since dogs are allowed off-leash in Colorado's state forests so long as they're under voice control, we worked daily on recall in the woods near our home. Not only would Rio run to me if I called out “Come!” because he knew I'd reward him with a treat, he started checking in with me every minute or so just to make sure we were together. As his trainer once noted,



“This is a dog who wants to please you.”

Bryan likes to fly fish on camping trips. Since Rio thinks shiny, wiggling fish are fun toys and tries to pounce on them, we figured out early on that I should hike with the dog while Bryan fishes. The dog will pad along the trail, looking back over his shoulder from time to time to make sure I'm keeping up, or to check in for a treat or a water break in the shade of aspen trees.

I grew so comfortable hiking with my furry buddy that we started heading out on our own adventures without Bryan or friends. I felt safe being “alone” with my 85-pound dog in remote areas. It was even empowering to see the look of respect from burly men as we'd head up a dirt road in our pickup truck. On hikes, sometimes we'd run into other women hiking with a dog and the pups would race around ecstatically, tails wagging. Other times we'd hike past hunters on horses (Rio wears a “blaze” vest during hunting season to avoid accidentally being shot) or families with young girls whose eyes lit up to see a

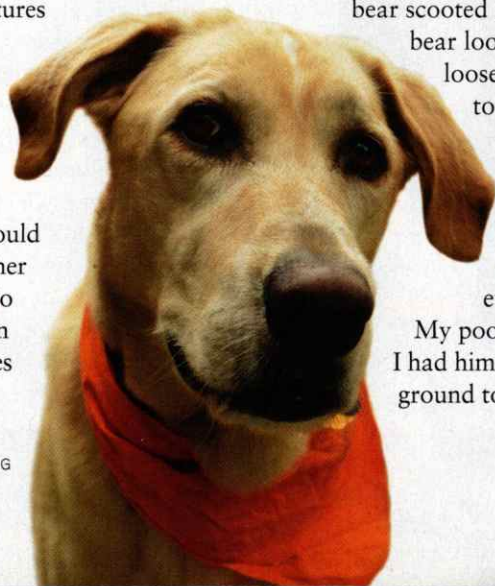
woman hiking with a dog—maybe visualizing future possibilities for themselves.

We've found adventure in far flung locales like New Mexico, Utah, Wisconsin, Iowa, and California—Rio loves swimming in the ocean, though the salty taste still baffles him a bit. But some of our craziest experiences have happened near home. Once he took off like a bullet after what initially looked like a large dog on a trail behind our neighborhood—the dog turned out to be a black bear. The

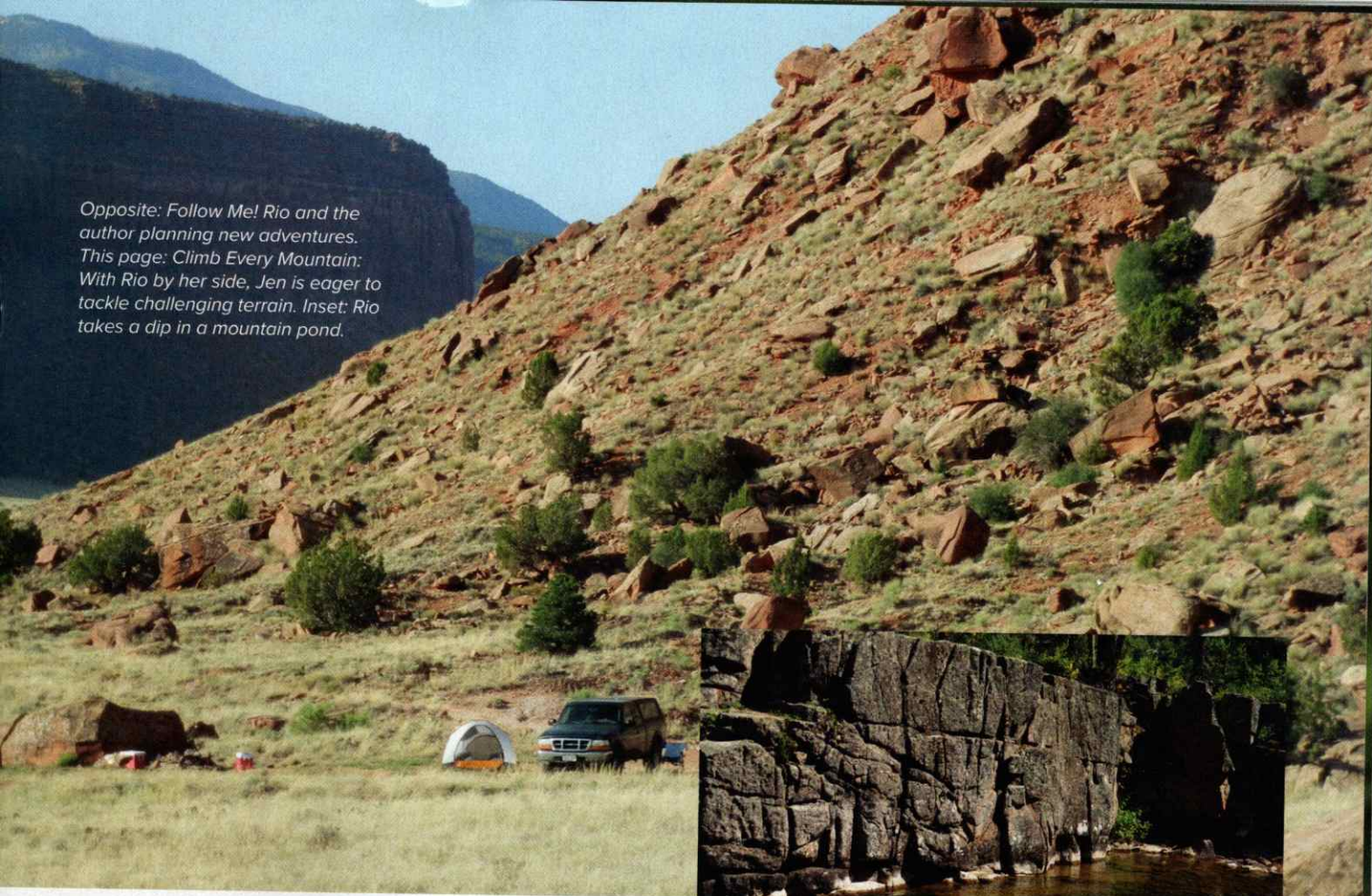
bear scooted up a pine tree and then Rio and the bear looked at me like, “What next?” I let

loose a terrified, “Rio, come!” and true to form, Rio abandoned his quarry to obey me so we could get the heck out of there. As we beat a retreat, I clapped my hands and yelled, “Hey bear!” to keep it from following us. Rio stayed by my side even though he was on high alert.

My pooch really showed his mettle when I had him leashed to walk through a campground to get to a trailhead. We waved at



Opposite: Follow Me! Rio and the author planning new adventures. This page: Climb Every Mountain: With Rio by her side, Jen is eager to tackle challenging terrain. Inset: Rio takes a dip in a mountain pond.



other campers who were sitting around campfires when suddenly, I looked up to see an enormous Malamute sprinting toward us. Rio positioned himself between me and the charging dog, who slammed into us. I went flying off the path and down an incline.

When I came to, a woman with a very concerned look on her face was extending her hand to help me up.

“Are you OK?” she asked. I wasn’t sure yet.

Nearby, a man was lying on top of the Malamute, pinning it to the ground. And there was Rio, a few feet away and staring at me. He hadn’t gone on the attack or run off—he was just loyally waiting for direction. My knee throbbed a little as I collected his leash and my wits. Soon we were on the Colorado Trail in time for a spectacular sunset. It was exhilarating to have survived the scrape and see Rio turn golden in the “magic hour” glow.

After seven years with Rio, Bryan and I welcomed another dog into our home. Rio modeled behavior for his new nine-pound sister, Peach, who learned to “Come” for treats and stick close on trails. I think the big guy makes her feel safe, too.

Recently we made a major change by moving from our little mountain town to the buzzing metropolis of Denver. I worried that the dogs would miss their off-leash hikes, but they seem impressed by the volume of urine available

to smell on strolls around the neighborhood, where we can walk to pet-friendly breweries and restaurants. We’ve sought out new experiences for them, like farmers’ markets, street fairs, dog-friendly swimming pools, and even an outdoor dog film festival. But I worried that Rio must miss trail time. I missed it, too.

I searched online and found a meetup for “Dog Moms” who hike with their dogs. When we met them at the trailhead in a state park near Red Rocks Amphitheater, Rio whimpered with excitement, ready to hit the trail. The path ran alongside a creek, and the dogs could splash together in the shade of pine trees. Rio cooled off in the water, then we’d charge up the trail in the front of the pack.

Back home that night as we all settled in to watch TV, something caught the corner of my eye: Rio’s tail was thumping up and down even though he was fast asleep. “He’s sleep wagging!” I said, instantly realizing that our outdoor adventures have just begun. **FD**

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