

RUFFDRAFTS

the DOG WRITERS ASSOCIATION of AMERICA

SUMMER 2024

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RUFFDRAFTS

Summer 2024

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Prayer *for* Animals and Their Masters

A POEM BY ALBERT SCHWEITZER

on the COVER



RIO ON HIKING TRAIL. PHOTO COURTESY OF JEN REEDER.

JEN REEDER

Alaska

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Jen with Rio in
September 2023.
Photo credit
Chrisi French.

Rio after a swim.
Photo credit
Jen Reeder.

MY HUSBAND BRYAN AND I always used to say if our dog Rio ever died, we'd finally go to Alaska together. Our 88-pound Labrador retriever mix was too big to take on an airplane, and why would we go on a hiking vacation without our hiking buddy?

In a few weeks, we're going to Alaska.

Rio was my very first dog, and the reason why I started narrowing my focus as a journalist to pets back in 2010. He opened my eyes to the wonderful world of dogs. Thanks to Rio, I've written around 1,000 articles about pets – mainly dogs – for regional and national publications and served a 2-year term as DWAA president. Bryan and I even sponsor The Rio Award in the DWAA Writing Competition each year for work about a dog “who changed someone's life in a profoundly positive way.”

We got to spend over 13 years with our smart, gregarious boy, whose motto we decided early on was “Born Ready.” We loved exploring Colorado trails together – especially when they led to a lake or river where Rio could swim.

Age and arthritis took a toll, and Rio couldn't hike in the last couple years of his life. I remember the first time I hiked without him: I felt so alone. It had never seemed strange to head outside for adventures with my awesome trail dog. We'd meet young girls and their families on hikes – my friendly Lab always loved meeting new friends – and I'd feel proud that maybe we'd modeled how exciting life can be with a dog by your side.

I missed him then, and I miss him now. We said goodbye to Rio last November on the day before Thanksgiving. He was a perfect dog with a perfect life and a perfect death, and we leaned into gratitude for that on the suddenly surreal day of giving thanks.

“We always said we'd go to Alaska when Rio died,” I said to Bryan at some point during the holidays. “Do we still want to do that?”

The answer, of course, was “Yes.” So this June, we'll hike in Denali National Park and fulfill a lifelong dream of gazing at the highest peak in North America. I'm not sure if dogs are allowed in the park because, sadly, I haven't needed to research it, but I know that if they were, Rio would have delighted in the open space. I can picture the way a gust of wind would blow our way and how he loved to face into the breeze, ears flopping back, eyes squinting, nose twitching – as always, born ready.

I suspect we'll take some of Rio's ashes with us to Denali and release them on a particularly beautiful overlook, or near a river he would have splashed into. I'll think of him every time the wind rustles leaves on a tree, and turn to face it, like Rio would have.

We'll cry, and we'll remember. That night, we'll raise a glass to the amazing dog that made a profoundly positive impact on our lives.

Then after a week, we'll return home to Colorado and Tux, the Yorkshire terrier mix we adopted a few months before Rio crossed the Rainbow Bridge. We'll hit the trails with the little comedian to help prepare him for his first camping trip later this summer. Because I've learned that special dogs come into our lives, and then they pass the torch to our next canine teacher. They each have something uniquely important and magical to bring to our lives.

So I'm dedicating this summer to honoring beautiful canine memories – and making new ones.

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. Visit her online at: JenReeder.com.



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