

lost

BUT NOT

alone

One woman survives three days soaked and cold in the wilderness with her dogs.

By Krista Karlson



Ah, wilderness: Poitras with a pack of happy campers

Annette Poitras had never given much thought to how she would die. She was healthy; she hiked every day. But lying in the soggy underbrush of Eagle Mountain, rain soaked through her clothes and teeth chattering so loudly it gave her a headache, she thought this was it. Her 6-year-old Border Collie, Chloe, sat a few feet away, shivering and keeping watch.

Poitras, 56, lives in the rugged outskirts of Vancouver with her husband, Marcel. After a long career in the grocery business, she recently retired and started her own venture, Annette's Doggy Daycare.

Situated just 10 minutes from the wilderness of the Canadian Cascades, Poitras regularly takes her dogs hiking in remote areas, anywhere they can explore.

On Monday November 20, 2017, that's exactly what she did. It was a day like any other: She had already been out for a morning walk, and she returned home to pick up Bubba, a 13-year-old Pug-Beagle mix who is one of her regulars.

"We'll just go for a short walk," she thought.

Poitras's gear was wet from her morning walk, so she changed into rubber boots and light clothes for a quick afternoon jaunt.



*Support your local search and rescue: A new book, *Three Dog Nights*, co-authored by Annette's husband, Marcel, offers hour-by-hour details of the ordeal and rescue, and advice on how to stay safe on the trail. It is available on Amazon and other sellers. Partial proceeds will go to Coquitlam Search and Rescue, who saved Poitras.*

Usually she has five or six dogs on Monday, but it was a slow day, so she set out with Bubba, Roxy (a 3-year-old Boxer), and Chloe. The weather system, named "Pine-apple Express" for the cold, heavy rain that originates off the coast of Hawaii and lands on the Pacific Northwest coast, showed no signs of letting up.

Just a few miles along one of her regular paths, Poitras stepped on a log to avoid a marshy section of trail. She jumped from that log to the next and lost her footing, crashing down on her left side. The pain knocked her unconscious. When she opened her eyes, she only saw two dogs. Bubba was missing.

Poitras thought Bubba, who's old and overweight, couldn't have gone far. "My adrenaline got me going, looking for Bubba," she says. In a daze of pain, she went off

the trail in search of the gregarious canine. Her phone had dropped out of her pocket during the fall. It was getting dark. "When it's dark, it's pitch black in the forest," she says.

She spent the night in the woods with Roxy and Chloe, hoping Bubba would return soon. All she could think of were the other dogs scheduled to come to her daycare on Tuesday. She had to get back.

Poitras knew the golden rule for lost hikers: Stay put. But the next morning, delirious with pain and determined to get home, she crawled around the thick forest with the dogs. She found Bubba, now soaked by the cold rain. All day they wandered, and when night fell she knew the situation was grim. Deteriorating due to dehydration and hypothermia, Poitras fixed her mind on the dogs. "I mainly focused on the three of them, and

I was determined no matter what to get those dogs out safe," she says. She laid down in the soggy undergrowth, the sky dark as tar and rain unrelenting.

Sleep never came. Poitras noticed Bubba sniffing under a fern. "He started digging and buried himself in the ground to get away from the wetness," she says. She followed suit, moving as much spongy material and dirt as she could in search of a dry space to rest. "I didn't do as good a job as Bubba."

Roxy, the affectionate Boxer, was so thirsty that she licked rain off Poitras's raincoat. Her upper lip was raw from all the licking, and with just a short coat of fur, she shivered uncontrollably. Roxy settled beside Poitras, who rested her raincoat on top of them. "We could both get warmth from each other," she says.

The night wore on slowly. "I thought, 'When is this going to end?'" She was angry at the search helicopters that flew overhead but couldn't see her, and worried that the dogs hadn't eaten in two days. "I'm not that religious, but I started praying out loud," she says. "Something very calm came over me, and I was OK to go. I wasn't scared then." Her husband Marcel says calmness is common for people who die of hypothermia. Of the 10 symptoms, Poitras exhibited nine.

On the third day, Roxy started barking. Poitras thought she heard a whistle but



Bubba is thrilled to be heading home.

couldn't be sure, since she had been hearing sounds in her mind the night before. She yelled, "I'm over here!" as loud as she could muster. "Roxy was trying to protect me. [She] didn't want anyone to come near me," she says. When the search-and-rescue volunteers finally reached Poitras, it took a while for the Boxer to calm down. They threw her granola bars and Bubba quickly obliged. As he chowed down and Roxy began to relax, Chloe brought sticks for the rescuers to throw.

But the dogs' sudden contentment wasn't the only bizarre thing the search and rescuers found. They couldn't read Poitras's pulse. She assured them she was, in fact, alive as Bubba snored beside her in the warm makeshift tent. After cutting off her soggy clothes and replacing them with dry ones, the team cleared a spot for the heli-

copter's rescue basket. She told them to send the dogs up first, but they refused. "I was arguing with them," she says. They told her to stop arguing.

It's good that she did, because paramedics estimate she only had a few hours left to live when they found her. On the way to the hospital, they tried five times to give her an IV, but her veins had collapsed. Her body had

shut down and prepared to die.

A friend took the dogs to the vet. They were hungry and dehydrated, but suffered no injuries. They were sent home with instructions to reintroduce food slowly and get lots of rest.

Poitras's legs and knees were badly bruised from crawling through the undergrowth, she had muscle damage, and she was severe-

ly dehydrated. But by the fourth night, she was able to take a few steps. When Chloe and Roxy visited the hospital, Roxy jumped on the bed and eagerly licked Poitras. Chloe was equally relieved. "When Chloe heard my voice, her whole face lit up and she just laid there and didn't move," she says.

As Roxy and Chloe comforted Poitras, it became clear to Marcel what Poitras had

known all along: These dogs saved her life. "Focusing on the dogs kept me going through each night," she says. "Roxy is my hero, really." The dogs were crucial, and not just in tangible ways like keeping watch and providing warmth. They were the reason she wanted to keep living.

This deep emotional connection is why Poitras says she plans to keep running her Doggy Daycare. And she'll keep hiking, too. She hasn't returned to the area where she got lost, saying the memories are too painful. She had a nervous breakdown the first time she heard a helicopter, and sometimes she has nightmares. "You always think, 'That won't happen to me,' but it did," she says.

The lure of the forest keeps her coming back, but not unprepared. Now, no matter how short the walk, she carries a backpack of survival essentials and tells Marcel where she's going. She encourages people to support their local search- and-rescue teams and animal shelters, which are often staffed by volunteers.

"My golly, I can't believe people are so kind and generous," she says of the people who rescued her and supported her recovery. And her gratitude isn't reserved for humans. "You'd be amazed what dogs can do." **FD**

Safety on the trail

Veterinarian and search-and-rescue team member Nancy East shares her top tips for safe hiking with your canine companion.

1. Carry identification. Make sure your dog has a microchip or identification tag so that if you get separated, someone can help your dog find his way home. Carry identification for yourself, too.

2. Invest in a rescue harness. (See photo.) These harnesses are specially built to carry an injured dog out of the woods.

3. Stay hydrated. Bring more

water than you think you'll need, and every time you take a drink, give your dog a drink, too. Bring a collapsible water bowl for easy hydration breaks.

4. Stay fueled. Find your dog's daily maintenance energy requirement (dog weight in kilograms x 30 + 70 = kcal/day) and multiply it by about 1.25 to determine how much food your dog needs for a hiking day. Make

sure you have snacks for yourself, too. Both of you should avoid eating a full meal before hiking, which can make your dog more prone to stomach flipping, a life-threatening medical issue.

5. Leave insects alone. Avoid walking near visible insect nests. If an insect lands on your dog, let it fly off on its own unless it's burrowing into your dog's fur. Swatting (on

yourself or the dog) could aggravate the pest.

6. Navigate challenging terrain slowly. If your dog tends to bolt down the trail, use a leash while you move slowly over terrain that could cause you both to stumble or fall.

7. Scan for snakes. The dog's muzzle is the most common location for snakebites, so discourage your dog

from sniffing holes that might house a snake.

8. Build endurance. Like humans, dogs should prepare with a regular exercise routine before hitting the trail. If you have doubts about your dog's physical abilities, start with small hikes.

9. Stay up-to-date on preventive care. Make sure your dog has an effective flea and tick preventative and is current on all vaccines.



Pack-A-Paw Rescue
Harness for transporting injured dogs

10. Share your itinerary. Let someone know where you're headed and when you expect to be home.

Krista Karlson is a freelance writer based in Connecticut, where she lives with her partner and their rambunctious hound, Beignet.