



ABOVE An excited pup is welcomed by Paws of Jackson Hole. This lucky canine was transported from an overcrowded shelter by Dog Is My Co-Pilot and brought out West where ample potential adopters await.

BY KATE HULL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
LARA AGNEW

Dog Is My Co-Pilot

Nonprofit takes animal rescue to the skies

There isn't typically much activity in the predawn hours at Driggs-Reed Memorial Airport. But on any given day, from early spring until the snow flies, you might catch a glimpse of a brightly painted blue plane taking flight on a unique mission: rescuing dogs across the Southwest.

Throughout the country, more than six million dogs and cats enter shelters each year. And while some shelters have been able to move to a no-kill model and find homes for each pet, many, predominantly in the South and Southwest, are still at capacity and find themselves without options—due to a myriad of problems like a lack of spay and neuter programs. But in the West, some shelters find themselves with more potential adopters than available animals. Enter Dog Is My Co-Pilot.

Jackson resident, nonprofit founder, pilot, and animal lover Dr. Peter Rork saw a way to connect the dots. Since 2012, Peter, alongside executive director Kara Pollard, has partnered with animal shelters throughout the Southwest, acting as the middleman of sorts rescuing dogs at risk of euthanasia, and transporting them to shelters in the West.

Peter started with humble beginnings as the sole pilot for the effort, operating out of his small personal plane and transporting a few dozen dogs at a time to willing shelters.

This past summer, he was able to add an additional six pilots to his roster, including Driggs resident Tim Riley.

"It's a wonderful mission I am happy to be a part of," Tim says. "We get to fly, see the country, we get to see a lot of happy people, and help rescue dogs. The whole thing put together is just truly fantastic."

One of Tim's favorite stops is a shelter in Oregon. "In Oregon, they place all the dogs with fosters before arrival, so when the plane lands, the foster parents are standing at the airport welcoming the dogs," he says. "It's a wonderful thing to see."

In addition to a larger team, they now have a new Dog Is My Co-Pilot Cessna 208B Grand Caravan plane with greater capacity, allowing the nonprofit to go from saving one thousand animals a year to one thousand a month.

During the warmer months, the colorful plane takes off on nearly daily trips from its homebase in Driggs heading to destinations as far south as the Texas and Mexico border, as well as shelters in New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The plane then heads to a variety of receiving shelters en route back to Driggs, the final destination.

"At some dropoff sites, we will have ten or twenty people involved because



ABOVE Jackson resident and pilot Dr. Peter Rork founded Dog Is My Co-Pilot in 2012 to help connect the dots between overcrowded shelters, ones with capacity, and hopeful adopters.

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Tim Riley, Pilot

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Volunteers and staff from Jackson's Animal Adoption Center pose with pilot Dr. Brent Blue (far left). Adoption center staff get crates ready to transport the dogs. Volunteers carry and cozy up with the newest four-legged arrivals to the Teton Valley Animal Shelter.

we are sending so many animals to different groups,” Kara explains.

Locally, Dog Is My Co-Pilot partners with the Animal Adoption Center and Paws of Jackson Hole in Jackson and the Teton Valley Animal Shelter and Aska's Animals in Victor.

“Animal shelters in our nation are over capacity, everyone is panicked,

and everyone is stressed,” Kara says. “I am fielding a few calls a day from Texas or California saying ‘I need help.’ We reach the partners who need it most.”

Peter hopes to soon add another plane to reach more and more animals and expand to other parts of the country, particularly out East. But for now, the impact is worth celebrating.

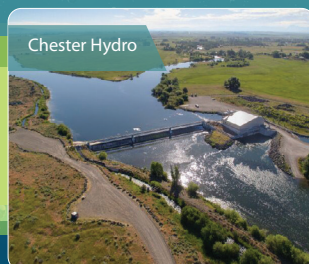
“We couldn't be prouder of the people who have helped get this going,” Peter says. “We are really happy with the direction it has gone. We had to scale up and get a bigger plane, then scale up and

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direction it has gone."

Dr. Peter Rork, Founder

The nonprofit increased carrying capacity this past summer with a new plane and the addition of six pilots. The changes allowed the group to go from transporting one thousand animals a year to nearly one thousand every month. This summer, Dr. Rork and his team surpassed twenty thousand dogs rescued.

bring on more pilots. Now, we are looking to scale up [again] and add another plane so we can help on the East Coast."

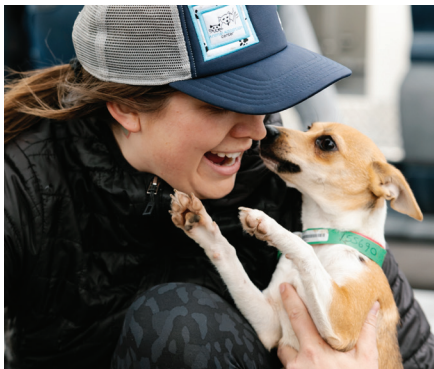
While the problem of overcapacity shelters is never-ending, the nonprofit is working to make what impact they can, by reaching the shelters that need help the most. And as always, Peter and Kara encourage potential pet owners to adopt.

"One thing people can do is work to be part of the solution and not part of the problem: Opt to adopt and not shop," he says. "Or, go by your local shelter and foster an animal so they can be ready for adoption, or volunteer. There are so many ways to help."

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There might not be a happier sight than watching the Dog Is My Co-Pilot plane land at Driggs-Reed Memorial Airport. Excited shelter volunteers cheer and welcome the canines, who seem to know they are getting a second chance at life. Pooches from El Paso, Abilene, Albuquerque, and elsewhere are loaded up to make their way to their next stop: A new home in the Tetons. **tv**

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