

# *The* CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR<sup>®</sup>

## The dog rescuer

In a 3,500-mile humanitarian odyssey, Greg Mahle transports rescue dogs from shelters in the South to new owners in the North.

By Peter Zheutlin, Contributor JANUARY 10, 2016



Greg Mahle cradles Paco and Taco, two of the rescue dogs he is transporting from the southern United States to new families in the Northeast. Mr. Mahle, who runs the nonprofit Rescue Road Trips, drops many of them off here in Putnam, Conn. (Melanie Stetson Freeman/The Christian Science Monitor)

Putnam, Conn.

As Greg Mahle, unshaven and road-weary, pulls his 12-wheeled rig into the parking lot of an auto parts store here on a sunny Saturday afternoon, he looks through the grime of nearly 3,500 miles that has collected on his windshield since we left his home in Zanesville, Ohio, five days ago. In front of us are a couple dozen people, many of them children, clapping and waving signs of welcome. It's a scene Mr. Mahle has witnessed here almost every other Saturday for the past 10 years.

His cargo? Approximately 80 very fortunate "rescue" dogs – dogs once lost, abandoned, neglected, or abused; many were just hours away from being put to death in "high-kill" shelters in Southern states. Over the past five days Mahle, whose not-for-profit operation is called Rescue Road Trips, has driven from Ohio to Texas and along the Gulf Coast picking up dogs saved by various rescue organizations to bring them to the Northeast. The people waiting? Families filled with anticipation and ready to welcome the dogs into their new homes. This day, when dogs and their new families are united, is known in rescue parlance as "Gotcha Day."

In a moment, Mahle will leap from the cab of the truck and announce in a booming, cheerful voice, "Hi, everybody! I'm Greg! Are you excited? I know you've been waiting for these guys for a while, but they've been waiting their whole lives for this moment!"

But before he does, Mahle sighs gently and turns to me. “You know, a few days ago these dogs were all going to die. Now, the doors will open, the light will pour in, and each one will be delivered into the arms of a loving family. *This* is heaven.”

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**I first learned of Mahle in 2012** when, after a 20-year “discussion” with my wife and children, I finally raised the white flag of surrender and agreed to get a family dog. I was utterly unfamiliar with the dog world. When my wife, Judy, first suggested a “rescue” dog, I imagined a Saint Bernard with a whiskey barrel under its neck searching the Alps for avalanche survivors. Soon enough I learned that rescue dogs were strays and shelter dogs in need of homes.

When we adopted a yellow Lab mix named Albie, it was Mahle who brought him north from Louisiana where he had languished in a public shelter in Alexandria for five months, very fortunate to have survived. The Alexandria shelter euthanizes between 80 to 90 percent of the approximately 3,500 dogs brought in each year. Nationwide, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimates that 1.2 million dogs are euthanized in shelters annually. And the vast majority of those that die are not incurably sick or aggressive or dangerous. They’re just on the wrong end of a massive canine overpopulation problem concentrated primarily in the South. Thanks to a shelter volunteer who took a special liking to Albie, he was spared.

Mahle became a traveling dog savior as improbably as I had welcomed a dog into our home. One winter night in 2005, after the last of five family restaurants he ran with his mother had closed, Mahle received a phone call from his sister Cathy, founder of [Labs4rescue](#), a nonprofit group in Killingworth, Conn. She told him a driver was transporting a handful of dogs from the South in a van for her and was nearing exhaustion behind the wheel. The driver was on the Interstate nearby.

Cathy was desperate and asked if Mahle could help rescue the rescuer and her dogs. Mahle readily agreed and ended up driving all of them to Connecticut that night and into the following morning. Since he had the time, he started helping Cathy out by driving south in a van and giving a few dogs a ride up north. He soon realized there was a need for a more systemized transport of dogs and thought he could do it. He started hiring some drivers and sometimes had three vans and a box truck on the road moving the animals. But he wasn’t comfortable not having direct oversight over each dog. So the operation evolved into Mahle and one other person doing all the transporting using one large rig. Though Mahle isn’t the only person transporting Southern rescue dogs north, few have engendered the kind of loyalty, grass-roots support, and fan base that he has; the Rescue Road Trips Facebook page has more than 73,000 followers.

Perhaps his part in this humanitarian chain was meant to be. A dog lover since he was a kid, Mahle says there were always strays living in and around the family household when he was growing up. By his reckoning, he and his brothers brought home at least a dozen lost or abandoned dogs, some smuggled in under towels to hide them from their parents.

“We found them on the street and fed them, and they lived on our porch,” he says. “This was 40 years ago and that’s how it was done.”

Now instead of rescuing dogs one at a time, Mahle is saving thousands. And his twice-a-month odyssey through the South provides both a disturbing glimpse into how dogs are treated in parts of the United States and a heartwarming tale of one man’s – and one invisible network of volunteers’ – quest to do something about it.

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**On a Monday afternoon**, we pull out of Zanesville with a trailer full of empty kennels and the exciting prospect of changing lives. Our destination this first night is a truck stop in Fairview, Tenn., some 450 miles south. When I’m not peppering Mahle with questions about his life, his work, and the somewhat inscrutable world of canine rescue, he and Tommy, the other man who shares the driving, listen to talk radio and chat occasionally, but mostly pass the miles in silence. (“Tommy” is a pseudonym; he prefers not to have his real name used.)

In Fairview, as we would every night on our weeklong journey, Tommy sleeps on a mattress in the back of the cab, Mahle in a small loft in the trailer, and me in a sleeping bag on the floor between the rows of kennels. Up at dawn Tuesday and bleary-eyed from a restless sleep on the hard floor, I avail myself of the truck stop restroom feeling very out of place among the dozens of long-haul truckers in my shorts, Teva footwear, and Ithaca College T-shirt.

Tuesday we roll on through Alabama and Mississippi. Mahle sits behind the wheel in his usual road garb: a tattered baseball cap that reads “Rescue Road Trips: Saving Lives 4 Paws at a Time,” a T-shirt, and jeans. He’s stocky with an appealing cherubic face, a short mop of brown hair, and Popeye forearms.

The weather is fair but turns ominous in north central Louisiana. By the time we reach the tiny town of Waterproof, the skies, appropriately enough, open up and the driving becomes hazardous. I spare Mahle my questions and let him concentrate on the road. By evening the weather clears and we take a spot in a truck stop parking lot outside Alexandria. We’ve driven nearly 600 miles today. As I stare at the ceiling from my sleeping bag, the trailer seems like a lifeless theater set. My thoughts are on tomorrow when the trailer will spring to life as dozens of dogs about to take the journey of their lives get onboard.

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**The next morning we take** a short drive to a veterinary clinic in Pineville, La., where a woman named Keri Toth works full time as a veterinary technician. Ms. Toth is also a principal player in a rescue organization called the CenLa (Central Louisiana) Alliance for Animals and was our adoption coordinator for Albie. Toth sends hundreds of dogs north with Mahle every year, and on this rainy Wednesday morning, she boards 40 dogs, many bound for an adoption event the coming Sunday in Rhode Island.

On a return visit to Alexandria a few weeks later, I tour the shelter where Albie survived for five months, defying the odds. It is heartbreaking to think of him sitting in a spartan enclosure day after day, week after week, with little to do but wait. Toth also takes me to rural dumpster sites where people discard their household trash, which, sadly, often includes litters of live puppies. She takes the puppies under her wing, nurses them to health, and readies them for adoption. People like Toth see so much suffering that compassion fatigue is an occupational hazard. For every dog they save, there are thousands they cannot. The faces of those to whom they are forced to say “no,” for reasons of money or space, haunt them.

Boarding all of Toth’s dogs this windy and wet Wednesday morning takes about an hour and a half. Among them are Trudy, a Louisiana Catahoula Leopard Dog, and Popcorn, a hound mix. The two bonded in their foster home, and Trudy, deaf and nearly blind, depends on Popcorn. Toth’s hope is to find a family at the Rhode Island adoption event who will take them both.

Once all are safely in kennels, we head west on Interstate 10 toward Houston. As it crosses southwest Louisiana, the highway is elevated just a few feet above massive bayous. Near Lake Charles, La., not far from the Texas border, oil and gas refineries, looming like huge Erector sets, dominate the landscape.

In Baytown, outside Houston, Kathy Wetmore of Shaggy Dog Rescue meets us. She’s there every other Wednesday to send dogs north with Mahle. Like Toth, Ms. Wetmore is one of those tireless people who sacrifice so much – financially and emotionally – to save just one more dog among the many thousands.

Most of Wetmore’s rescues come from Houston, which has one of the nation’s highest populations of lost or abandoned dogs. An estimated 1.2 million strays are living (and dying) on the city’s streets, concentrated in Houston’s poorest neighborhoods – third-world enclaves in the shadow of the office towers that house some of the world’s richest corporations.

On a return trip to Houston, I walk through the Fifth Ward, one of its most dangerous neighborhoods, with Alicia McCarty and Kelle Davis, volunteers with the Forgotten Dogs of the Fifth Ward Project. I see dogs scavenging for scraps in the parking lots of fast-food restaurants and supermarkets, and living under abandoned houses, in ditches, and on scrap heaps. Some scamper across highways and railroad tracks and many, Ms. McCarty tells me, are injured or killed that way. Many, too, are afflicted with mange, parasites, and other illnesses.

Yet, with some love and physical care, most would make wonderful companions.

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**Houston’s prodigious stray population** raises a question that nags at me throughout the trip: Why *are* there so many stray and abandoned dogs in the South? I put the query to many Southerners engaged in rescue work. First and foremost, they tell me, there is no strong culture of spaying and neutering dogs in many parts of the region. When I walked through Houston’s Fifth Ward, I saw several dozen male dogs in just a few hours and not one had been neutered. I can’t recall the last intact male dog I’ve seen in the Northeast. Many dogs, too, even those with owners, live outside, where they can wander and mate freely, creating more offspring that

people don't want.

Another reason is that in many parts of the South dogs aren't seen as companion animals, as they mostly are in the North, but more as property. If they are supposed to fulfill a function – as a hunting dog, for example, or a guard dog – but prove ill-suited for the task, they are simply abandoned or worse.

And there's a lot of backyard breeding, people hoping to make a few dollars peddling puppies. If they can't sell the puppies, they abandon them. Finding litters of live puppies left by the roadside is not uncommon. It's a deeply rooted and complex cultural and social problem.

To be sure, there are many in the South who care deeply for their dogs. They remain a coveted member of the family, with a bed by the fireplace and the occasional dinner of gourmet victuals. Yet many Southerners told me that the prevailing mentality is "it's just a dog."

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**After boarding Wetmore's** dogs in Baytown, we head back east for two hours. Deeper into Cajun country, we stop at a service station with a large, grassy field nearby. About 50 dogs are now onboard, and it is time for each to get a short walk. It is hot and humid, even in the early evening, but Mahle and I take out the dogs one at a time, while Tommy changes paper in the kennels and makes sure each dog has water.

As we walk, I am reminded of how physical Mahle's work is. The driving is far more demanding than in a car: Tires often need to be changed, and roof-mounted air conditioning units checked. Then there's lifting dozens of dogs, some weighing as much as 80 pounds, in and out of kennels; securing the leashes; and sometimes being towed along by rambunctious canines suddenly eager to poop.

Mix in the sweat from doing this in Tabasco-hot weather and no shower for two days, and you have a recipe for an undeniably pungent yet oddly sweet smell. And yet, just as I was wondering how I was going to go another two days without a shower, Mahle ambles by with one of the dogs and says, in all seriousness, "I pity people with real jobs."

We reach the outskirts of Lafayette, La., after dark. Heavy downpours have left many of the truck stop parking lots flooded, making it difficult to find a place to spend the night. We are forced to double back 10 miles before we finally locate one, adding to an already long day.

When he's on the road, Mahle is effectively working 24 hours a day for six straight days. Even when he's catching a few hours' sleep in the trailer with the dogs, he's on duty. That's a 144-hour workweek, and he makes the trip, 4,200 miles door-to-door, every other week. When he's home, he works 50 to 60 hours a week.

He has to do administrative work, repair the truck and trailer, and clean and sanitize every kennel before the next run. All told, that's about 400 hours a month. Mahle charges \$185 to transport a dog, an amount that is typically rolled into the adoption fee that families pay to rescue organizations for the animals. Expenses are high: Fuel alone can run more than \$7,000 per month. Then there is Tommy's salary and the constant, costly truck repairs. When you do the math, Mahle is making less – often significantly less – than minimum wage, depending on how many dogs he has on a run.

We load more dogs in Lafayette early Thursday morning and make pickups in Hammond and Slidell, La., before beginning the longest stretch of the run, virtually nonstop from eastern Louisiana and through the night to Allentown, Pa. Early Thursday evening we arrive outside Birmingham, Ala., where Mahle's "Birmingham Angels," as he refers to this group of some three-dozen volunteers, spend a few hours giving each dog an extended walk and lots of love. Similar groups meet Mahle and his canine companions in Allentown and Rocky Hill, Conn., every other week.

"We are all cogs in a wheel in rescue," Mahle says as he stares through the dirty windshield. "Everyone has a role to play. You can't be in this for praise or glory. I'm in it because I want to see the dogs and pat their heads."

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**From the moment we left Zanesville** on Monday, Mahle has been making frequent use of Facebook. He documents every rescue road trip and posts dozens of pictures of the dogs as he picks them up and takes them on their freedom rides.

In his posts, all tapped out on an iPhone during refueling stops or when Tommy is behind the wheel, Mahle encourages families to get their welcome signs ready. And as he gets closer and closer to the Northeast, the

online posts ramp up the anticipation. He wants Gotcha Day to be Christmas, New Year's, Thanksgiving, your birthday, and graduation day all rolled into one.

Mahle's Facebook chronicles have another important audience, too. Every dog that gets a new home owes its life to the many people who extended hearts and hands to make the journey possible. Some "pull" the dogs from shelters and off the streets and tend to their medical needs. Others work with rescue organizations in both the South and North, arranging for the dogs' adoptions. These tireless volunteers may never see a Gotcha Day in person, but, through Mahle's posts, they can share the joy and see the happy endings they helped make possible.

Early Friday evening, we arrive in Allentown and the Angels are there, as always. This time barbecue grills are set up, and salads and desserts cover two folding tables. Children and adults walk and play with the dogs for a couple of hours, lifting spirits – the dogs', Mahle's, and their own.

It is almost midnight by the time Mahle settles into his bunk and me into my sleeping bag in the cocoon-like trailer. It always takes a little while for the dogs to drift off, but, when they do, it can be eerily silent inside, except for the gentle thrum of the generators. None of the dogs know what tomorrow will bring, but Mahle is sure they know something good is about to happen.

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**The start of gotcha day** is marked by the sound of a single dog barking, then two, and then three. Soon you can hear wagging tails thumping against kennel walls and paws scratching at doors. The sounds build gradually as the rising din stirs more dogs to wakefulness, until the trailer is alive with the cacophony of 80 canine souls on the threshold of new lives.

For dozens of families waiting down the road, this is the day they've been anticipating – some for days, some for weeks, some even months. Their welcome-home signs are ready. In their houses, they have placed dog beds in front of fireplaces and in cozy corners. They have purchased balls and chew toys.

The life of every dog we've gotten to know these past few days will be changed in a few hours – and so will the lives of every family ready to welcome them home.

For Mahle, this is the day that makes the endless miles of blacktop, the long absences from home, and the burden of carrying so many people's hopes and dreams on his shoulders worthwhile. I ask Mahle what it's like for him at the end of Gotcha Day when, suddenly, the trailer is empty and quiet. He pauses for what seems an eternity, turning the question over in his mind.

"It's a difficult emotion to explain," he finally says softly. "It has opposites in it. I'm happy to be finished and excited to be going home to see Adella and Connor [his wife and stepson]. But I don't like going back in the trailer because the dogs are all gone. It's lifeless and cold, plastic and metal.

"The good part of the job, the dogs, are gone, but I feel satisfied it was a job well done," he adds. "When the last dog is handed to its new family, I survey the panorama of people with their new dogs and think, I've never seen so many happy people in one place. The people aren't interacting with each other; they're all getting to know their dogs. They're all having the same experience. You can believe the world is a better place."

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