

Hetta Huskies- A Veterinary Experience?



(Written by pre-vet volunteer, Emmanuelle Furst).



Overview

There is no veterinarian within the organization, yet volunteering at Hetta Huskies can be quite the veterinary experience.



I came to Hetta in the fall of 2013 expecting to learn much from being the Medical Dog Overseer, but I truly had no idea how much knowledge and hands-on experience I would walk away with after six months during the 'in-season'. So, if you are already a practicing veterinarian, a veterinary or pre-veterinary student, or a nurse or pre-medical student, I hope this short summary of my experiences can help you decide whether Hetta Huskies will be a good fit for you.

As a quick introduction, I am currently a veterinary student at Colorado State University (I started in 2014), but I found out I had been accepted while in Hetta.

I had already had my 2,000 hours of required veterinary experience before arriving at Hetta, drawing blood in clinics and assisting in surgeries, but had not started school for veterinary medicine yet. I am happy to answer any additional questions you may have about either Hetta Huskies or about vet school in general (email: emmanuelle1st@gmail.com).

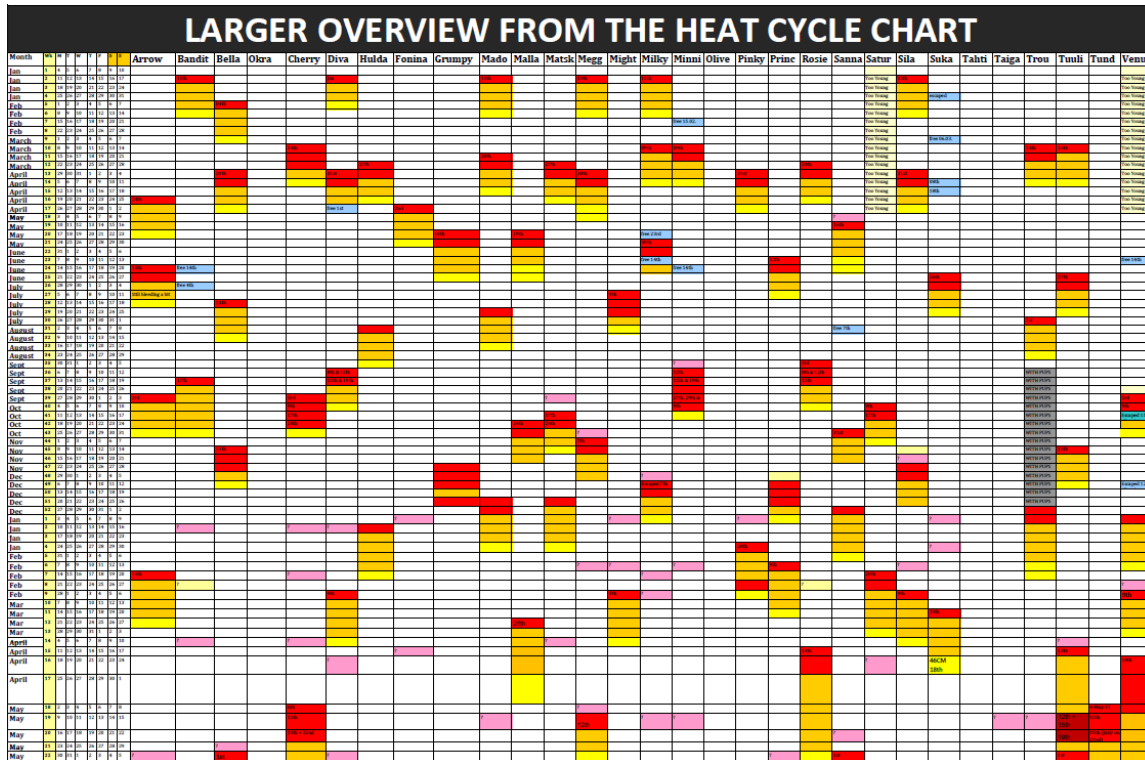
During my time in Hetta, one other veterinary student joined the group for one month and I believe that she also learned and participated in far more medical-related activities than she expected. Watching her experience and the level of responsibility I was given by comparison allowed me to reflect on the different rewards and challenges that will come depending on the time you commit to your stay.

Regardless of which time of year you choose to work at Hetta, dog checks are performed weekly and heat checks are performed three times a week.

When we check the females, we record those which are in heat, those which are specifically in the danger period and which are 'in the clear', so that we can determine which dogs can train or run with each other without incident, and so that we also know those which need to be monitored or isolated from males for a few weeks until the danger time has passed. Even this simple task, when repeated with such frequency, gets you so much more comfortable with handling dogs, it is surprising.



In the winter we also check their nipples for frostbite, and some of the more 'at risk' male dogs also have their testicles checked at the same time.



Of course, they are not the only 'animals' who can suffer from the cold and at one point I gave myself frostbite by not remembering to change out of wet shoes in arctic temperatures before driving a car.



Hence for a while afterwards, I was confined to 'indoor' projects. Around the same time, one of the dogs, Ted, needed to be put down (due to a tumor in his anal glands for which surgery would have been a relatively unlikely 'fix').

Before we buried him, Anna asked if I wanted to practice a castration operation on the body and when I definitely said yes, she asked the local vet to come over to bring a blade and she (there are three very different vets here and they are all amazing) decided to stay and help teach me the operation.

Once we started cutting, it became an autopsy, and the vet wanted to see the tumor and if there was any infection further up the colon, so it became much more of a learning opportunity for me.

We examined each organ, and performed an exploratory surgery for learning purposes. At some point Anna somewhat jokingly mentioned taking Ted apart and building a skeleton, and I seriously told her I would *love* to do so if she was at all serious about it, as I could learn about every bone and muscle in the body along the way. And so this became my individual project (Anna is always open to you choosing an individual project to work on, depending on the time available, and she tries, then, to juggle you enough time to complete your project in the midst of the other needs of the organization).

I was very lucky to have a current veterinary student arrive towards the end of my stay who helped correct a few cardinals and such, and taught me further about the anatomy, then took over the project with another girl to finish the ribs after I left. The skeleton is now on top of the piano and you can learn from it as well if you'd like to! But the point is, there are many learning opportunities if you look for them, and Anna is very encouraging of such projects.



OK – so back to basics...

Every Sunday, you do a physical exam on all of the dogs at the farm, looking for weight changes, checking for any injuries, any skin issues, any eye, ear, or limb issues, any bumps or lumps, checking for lactation or nipple issues and heat cycles for the females (and more).



The previous Dog Overseer will walk through the procedure and introduce you to all the record keeping, as you are then responsible for determining the amount of water and food (dry and meat) each dog gets daily, which dogs need to be on the medical watch list for an issue developing further, which dogs need immediate treatment and what that treatment will be (antibiotics, oral or topical, and the dosage, creams, muscular massages, etc.), and which dogs need to visit the local veterinarian for needs beyond your and Anna's abilities.

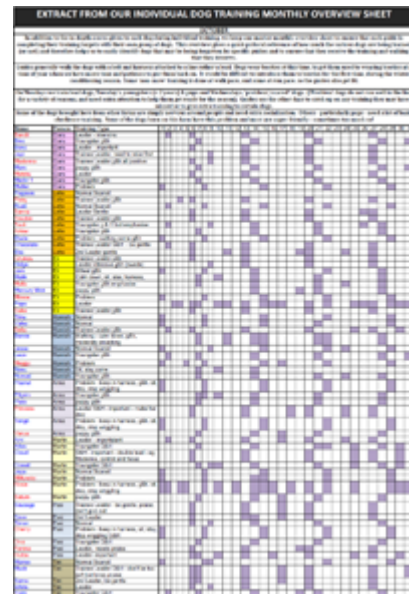
As you can imagine, it is a lot of responsibility and learning, even just for the basic weekly tasks, and you will be introduced to the process by the outgoing Medical Dog Overseer, and well as overseen by Anna until she trusts your judgment on treatment and diet decisions (and always a bit after that, of course, as they are her dogs). You will learn a lot, very quickly, just from this process and you will probably gain a ton of computing skills into the bargain since everything is recorded into an intricate set of monitoring documents that can be presented to the vet upon request.

Depending on the season you choose, you may also have additional responsibility. In late spring or late summer, there will not be much 'emergency medicine' to handle, but there will be time the side to do some veterinary procedures at the local vet (or if you are a practicing veterinarian, you will be incredibly useful on site!) that need to be done out of the busy, running season.

For example, castrations (for dogs with aggression issues, a history of being prone to severe frostbite, or any undescended testicles) will need to be operated pre- or post-season, and you will be able to watch and help with the operations.

Random operations that were noted during the running season as necessary but not necessary immediately will be performed in late spring once the client season slows, such as dental procedures like suturing up a hole in a gum, or removing teeth when necessary. Some females will be spayed if they are having hormone related lumps and bumps, or common false pregnancies. The local veterinarian is an amazing teacher, letting you try to place a catheter, or help suture up the patient post-surgery, and will teach you during the operation if you ask questions. During these times, you will be able to focus more on the medical tasks, as you won't have the busy season to also occupy your time.

If you decide to come during the training season, in Autumn, all volunteers will be breaking up fights between the dogs during training due to their excitement at finally getting to run again. As the Medical Overseer, you will be treating fight injuries, from torn ears to punctures (worrisome if near a joint). Some will only need to be watched to make sure they heal properly without infection, some will



need topical antibiotics, some will need pain medication and a chosen oral antibiotic, some will be severe enough to need suturing or stapling on site (obviously, with pain meds and antibiotics as well), and some will need to go to the veterinarian immediately.



Anna really wants you to learn, and will walk through the process with you and ask what you think should be done before giving her opinion (and as she wanted to be a veterinarian for a while and is very interested in the subject, she is another valuable resource).

For instance, she sewed up the injury shown here herself, since every third weekend, the nearest vet is over 300km away and it is just easier to deal with wounds in-house. This is probably the extreme end of the kind of work they do in-house, but stitching and particularly stapling, in-house is an almost weekly affair and you will soon find yourself doing your first stapling and stitching if you haven't done it before.



Sometimes you will do this under Anna's guidance but sometimes the vets will also let you get 'hands-on'. The vet shown in the background here is the lead vet for the area and has enormous amounts of sled dog experience, with 1000s of dogs under her care (but it is still Anna and her volunteers the vets turn to when they need an extra hand in a surgery rather than the managers or workers of any of the other farms, and that says a lot about how they feel about the standards of care at Hetta Huskies).

When lumps are growing or of concern, operations mid-season are sometimes necessary, and you will decide with Anna which dog's needs are great enough for them to be out of the running season for the months necessary to recover.

Of course, you will go to the vet and help with the operation when possible, and be in charge of the treatments post-operation. And you will also have other responsibilities of being a volunteer and helping run the safaris and prepare teams, with everyone else mid-season, so if you thought you knew what hard work was, before arriving, think again. And just when you think you are done for a day, there will be a fight and you will be shaving and cleaning and stapling and bandaging when all you want to do is curl up into bed and sleep!



I thought that all the warnings in the guide manual about the length of days and the cold and the challenge would just be to put people off and it took me a while to realize that they were actually going to be true as I watched the intensity with which we worked during the days build from autumn through to the start of the crazy winter period. Indeed, the whole thing was probably the most extreme challenge of my life – but it was also one of the most rewarding! Em's blog (a volunteer turned guides, kind of sums up how it feels here in general:

<http://emslifeinthewild.wordpress.com/2014/02/01/life-as-a-husky-guide/>)

So you want to come, but how long should you stay? Clearly it takes a while to get to know all the dog's names, and that task alone can keep you from doing any medical work if you aren't showing initiative and improvement quickly in the beginning. Seriously, learn the dogs from the website before you arrive, regardless of how long you stay, but especially if your stay is towards the short side.

The longer you stay, the more responsibility you will be given, and the more you will take away from the experience. It takes a month to learn the basics of the farm, so if you can only come for a month, you will either not get to experience of the medical side of life at Hetta, or if you are already experienced medically, you will assist other's in the tasks and mostly focus just on the medicine and the routine dog checks. I stayed 6 months, and got an experience of a lifetime. But for the medical experience, I would recommend you at least stay 3 months, and would highly recommend longer if you can.

Practicing vets from the EU can work in Finland, incidentally, with little effort, and will probably be really surprised by what can be achieved in this kind of frontier community without Xray or monitoring machines, without anesthetists to help with

operations (unless Anna and some volunteers are called in to help). And, of course, all of the reindeer work is like something out of the wild west and the characters are pretty similar too. **I hope this summary helped, and all of the Hetta dogs look forward to meeting you!**