

Making Sure We're Sleeping Tight: Sniffing out the Bed Bugs with Roo and Maverick

By Jane Singelton



*Stew Philpott with his bed bug detector Labs,
Roo and Maverick.*

When Stewart Philpott was growing up in Columbus, Ohio, he longed to have a dog. “But as the child, you can’t make the decisions. At the end of the day, it’s up to Mom and Dad. And of course we lived in the city, too, which makes having a dog difficult.”

By the sixth grade Stew and his family moved to Ottawa, Ontario, Canada’s capital city, where his parents had accepted positions in the workforce. Stew attended middle school and high school there and worked in the hotel/hospitality industry during his high school and university years.

When an opportunity to spend a summer working in Banff National Park came Stew’s way, he jumped at the chance. Banff, Stew says, is the ‘Yellowstone’ of Canada. Although he intended to stay for only one summer, Stew ended up staying at Banff for twelve years. During those years, Stew worked in the hotel/hospitality field and as a tour guide and a fish guide.

While at Banff, Stew met and fell in love with Jill Mader, who would later become his wife. In 1990, Jill gave Stew a very loving gift for Valentine’s Day. “I had been hesitating,” Stew said, “trying to decide if the first puppy of my life would be a yellow Lab or a black Lab. And lo and behold, one

afternoon Jill brought home a little pudgy black Lab puppy. I named her Freedom.” Freedom became Stew’s companion, fishing partner, and his duck dog. “When she was six months old, I took Freedom duck hunting for the first time. She took to it naturally, so we developed our bond quite early.”

Stew knew he wanted a career in the outdoors. His interests were in the outdoors—hiking, fishing, hunting. So Stew registered at Selkirk College, earned a certificate in Renewable Resources, and subsequently got a job with the British Columbia Forest Service in McBride, B.C. So Stew, Jill, and Freedom moved to McBride.



Stew’s daughters and his detection dogs at home at Beaver Creek Lodge, B.C.

For the next fifteen years as the Philpott family grew, Freedom was their devoted Lab. When Freedom died, Stew, Jill, and their daughters, Sydney and Madiline, grieved. “It broke our hearts. We went through a year of mourning when we just could not bring ourselves to get another dog.”

But Stew knew that when the time was right, he would get another Lab. He and Jill now owned and operated a lodge in McBride on 112 acres of land with a river running by it. It was a natural place for a Lab. “I was searching the Internet and came across the Florida K9 Academy founded and run by Bill Whitstine, a well-respected canine trainer,” Stew said. “I had already decided that this time, I wanted a working Lab—I knew that handling a Lab as a hobby or a second-job type of thing would be ideal for me. So I called Bill and discovered he not only trains dogs to detect mold, he also trains dogs to detect termites and bed bugs.”

Since Stew and Jill were running their own Beaver Creek Lodge and were contracting their custodial services to other hotels in the area, a dog with bed bug detection skills seemed ideal. At that time and still today, news sources are full of reports of the resurgence of bed bugs, especially in the hotel industry. “New York has issues, Hawaii, Las Vegas—I don’t believe there’s a North American city that hasn’t had bed bug issues in the last couple of years. And in southwestern British Columbia, reported

cases of bed bugs in urban areas increased substantially from 2003 to 2005.

Years ago, bed bugs were kind of an old wives' tale with the off-to-bed admonishment of "Sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite." But now, Stew said, he receives Google Alerts about bed bug infestations in apartments, hotels, universities, shelters, even on cruise ships.

Private homes also develop problems when a family member travels, bed bugs get into the luggage, and the traveler inadvertently carries them into his home. Pest control professionals indicate that international travel, more frequent travel, and less effective pesticides have allowed the bed bug's resurgence.



Stew Philpott and Roo

So the time was right for launching a bed bug detection business. Two-year-old Roo, a fun-loving chocolate Lab, became Stew's first bed bug detection dog. Initial training for the team of Stew and Roo was by Bill Whitstine at the Florida K9 Academy. Stew brought the whole family to Florida. While they vacationed Stew attended the academy. Then the family traveled home to Canada together with Roo.

After a couple of months, Stew was getting enough calls from the hotel industry that he decided to add another detection dog to the team. "When I was at the Academy, my wife and I met Maverick, a black Lab, retired bomb detection dog that reminded me so much of Freedom that we bonded. When I got home, I convinced Jill that we should purchase him as well. So we decided to call Bill and purchase Maverick." Bill and his Academy staff retrained Maverick for bed bug detection, then shipped him to Stew's home in Canada.

Both Roo and Maverick were rescue dogs. "Bill makes a habit of locating unwanted dogs in Florida shelters, working with the shelter dogs, and turning them into excellent working dogs that can detect bed bugs, termites, or mold. He's quite innovative."



Roo responds to "seek" when scent detecting, then passively alerts, then reconfirms his find.

Labradors are so suited to this type of work, Stew said. "They are food hounds, they love to please their master, and they are not intimidating to people they meet." Maverick is very methodical, Stew said. Because of his previous work as a bomb detection dog, he is very precise. He won't alert until he is absolutely sure. Rooster, as Stew sometimes calls Roo, will walk into a room and his sphere of scent is a little larger. He will alert to a nightstand, for instance, and I know we have to do a closer search to pinpoint the nest. But Maverick would have made the drawer his first alert. "They have different personalities. Roo is faster, but Maverick has pinpoint accuracy."



*Born and raised in Florida, Roo and Maverick
soak-up some Canadian sunshine.*

“I wish I could take credit for training these dogs, but I can’t. The Florida K9 Academy gets all the credit. They perform well for me with the handling skills I learned from Bill Whitstine and the Academy. But I give the Academy all the credit for training Roo and Maverick in their scent detection skills.”

Stew didn’t raise these dogs as puppies. They were almost two and six years old before they came to live with Stew and his family and they didn’t have a master—that’s probably why they ended up in the pound, Stew said. “So it was a bit of a struggle at first. I had to teach them that I, not they, was Alpha Dog and I was master. It took each dog about a month to assimilate that.”

“I recommend to everyone, whether you have a Lab or another breed, spend that one hour a day with your dog. That’s all it takes. Go for a walk, a run, a bike ride—really make a commitment to spend at least one hour a day with your dog. You’ll find that they will listen to you and they will come when you ask them to. They’ll be more obedient in general. And it only takes one hour a day. The rewards are tremendous.”



*The Hygienique Select Bed Bug Detection Team
at www.hygieniqueselect.com.*