

Minn. uses dogs to sniff out zebra mussels

By Jim Adams, Minneapolis Star Tribune

A novel player will show up at the governor's fishing opener on Saturday in Park Rapids.

But it will be a work day for the new guy.

Brady, a brown Labrador, will be sniffing around boats and trailers, looking for uninvited guests – namely zebra mussels, which have been spreading across Minnesota lakes and rivers. Brady will be joined by his handler, Lt. Julie Siems, a water resource enforcement officer for the Department of Natural Resources.

Brady and two K-9 pals, Digger and Laina, will be deployed in the metro area and outstate for the opener, the first time the DNR has used dogs to detect the invasive species, said Travis Muyres, a DNR enforcement officer.



Lt. Julie Siems with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has her K-9, Brady, detect zebra mussels.

Photo/Joel Koyama/Star Tribune

Minnesota is the second state to use dogs for this purpose, said Muyres. The first was California, which Muyres visited in March to learn how to train the dogs.

The canines were certified this week for mussel detection, making them part of the DNR's effort to enforce laws banning the transport of the mussels, milfoil and other invasive species between state waterways on boats and trailers, Muyres said.

Digger, a 3-year-old black Lab, displayed his new skills on Tuesday. He and DNR handler Lt. Harry Hanson co-produced a media demonstration at a boat trailer in a parking lot at Fort Snelling State Park. Zebra mussels had been hidden from the nosy dog in the right rear headlight.

As Hanson led Digger, pointing to parts of the boat and trailer, the Lab sniffed and moved on. But when Digger reached the hiding place, he promptly sat down and awaited his reward: a bright yellow ball that he gleefully chomped and slobbered on. "He loves the ball," Hanson said.

Muyres trained the dogs for five weeks. For the first four, they learned to smell, locate and signal deer meat. In the last week, they learned to locate zebra mussels.

"We brought out the mussels and after four hides, they had it down," Hanson said.

Brady was obtained for free and Digger for \$300, both from animal rescue shelters, Muyres said. Laina, a Belgian Malinois, was purchased from a breeder for \$2,500, funds donated by the North Country Bowhunters.

Muyres said the dogs will be trained this summer to detect weapons and ammunition and to track scents to find people, evidence or other objects. The DNR already had two sniffing dogs, one of which will retire soon, and has used canines to sniff out weapons and to track and find illegally taken game

and fish since 1995, he said.

Muyres said Laina will be in the metro area for the fishing opener and Digger will be in Alexandria, Minn.

The dogs will help stop invasive aquatic species, but the main responsibility still rests with boaters and fisherman, who must inspect their equipment, Muyres said.

“We have 120 inspectors, three dogs and 23 [hot water] decontamination units,” he said. “But with 10,000 lakes, we can’t do it all.”