



Brenda Missen photo

Above, Bailey and Maddie challenge each other to a tug-of-war match

Left, having a rest after a playful day.

Camp Auntie Brenda goes to the dogs

Swimming, hiking, playing games – these are activities you would expect to take part in at camp. Retrieving sticks? Sleeping under a Muskoka chair? Wrestling matches that allow biting? Not so much. But all these activities were enthusiastically embraced at the latest session of “Camp Auntie Brenda,” which readers may remember from features recently run in these pages. Yes, Camp Auntie Brenda went to the dogs – or, rather, the dogs went to Camp Auntie Brenda – one recent Indian summer weekend.

BY BRENDA MISSEN
Special to This Week

It figures that now the children are back in school, we're having optimum weather for summer camp. Alas, it may be too late for the kids, but it's not too late for Camp Auntie Brenda. We're back in session, with a couple of campers who don't have much use for school anyway. That's because one is my dog, Maddy (no stranger to Camp Auntie Brenda), and the other is a canine pal of hers named Bailey, just four months older than my one-year-old pup.

Despite the perfect weather conditions, I have to confess I'm a little worried about our new camper. When Maddy and I have previously visited her home, Bailey's been so happy to see us she's barked madly and strained on her chain to try to jump on me and chase after Maddy. Camp Auntie Brenda has a “no tying up” policy, but there are a couple of cottagers still in residence next to camp property, so it may be necessary. And will her barking drive them mad?

Bailey's curtailed freedom is the unfortunate consequence of where she lives – a lodge setting where summer guests rightly expect peace and quiet and not the over-exuberance of a canine welcome wagon. In addition to having

to be on a run, Bailey had a long lesson with a barking collar, whose shocks she valiantly ignored.

Bailey arrives in the afternoon, full of vim and vigour. Clearly, our first camp activity is going to be a long hike.... Out of consideration for the neighbours, I walk her past their properties on leash. But once we get close to the trail, I let her go.

It's the moment of truth: will she take off? With Maddy in tow?

Bailey does not take off. She runs ahead, yes – as much as she can with Maddy alternately biting at her front legs and licking her face – but she's much more diligent than Maddy in coming back every few minutes to check that I'm still following behind. Both pups come when called. And there's no barking when neighbours are spotted.

Counsellor Brenda breathes a sigh of relief. This session is going to be fun. Clearly the key is a Camp Auntie Brenda specialty: Exercise!

And there's no shortage of that. Every morning and afternoon, we go for a long hike, ending at a nearby beach for Swimming Lessons. Maddy won't go in out of her depth, and neither, her owner told me, will Bailey. But the rivalry for retrieving sticks thrown farther and farther out from shore has Bailey swimming, yes, really swimming, while Maddy stays in the shallows, watching. Watching and waiting....

The tugs of war that ensue aren't quite as friendly as they should be, so eventually we give up on Stick Retrieval and head for home.

Our next camp activity is Toy Sharing. Maddy likes to entice Bailey to play by holding a rope or stuffed animal in her mouth for Bailey to try to grab. Unfortunately, when Bailey gets hold of it, she transforms Maddy's good-natured teasing into something more akin to taunting. (Counsellor Brenda confiscates the toys, one by one.) And forget gathering in the dining hall so all the campers can eat together. Bailey's possessiveness over her food is so fierce that meals are served in separate rooms.

But without these external triggers, the two campers play wonderfully together. When sheer fatigue knocks them off their feet, they simply lie down to engage in wrestling matches that involve lots of friendly biting and nails-on-blackboard sounds of teeth clacking against teeth. (Counsellor Brenda covers her ears.)

Eventually even lying-down play is too much exertion, and so we all head to the dock for Rest Hour. While Counsellor Brenda soaks up the sun's warm rays in a Muskoka chair,

both campers squeeze in together under the chair to snooze in the cool shade.

At times Maddy is a bit jealous of Bailey honing in on “her” territory. Her puppy pal always has to be closest to the counsellor, so much so that when we have Movie Night, Bailey leaps up on the couch (not an at-home privilege...) and lays her head on my lap for the entire two-hour movie. After a bemused look at the counsellor, Maddy graciously surrenders her place of pride to Bailey and lies at our feet.

When Bailey's owner comes to pick her up, he's pleased, but by no means surprised, to see how tuckered out she is. He's positively tickled to learn she got her Swimming Badge.

Bailey also got her Sharing Badge (and Maddy too) – though this one was touch and go. But just before the session ended, the telltale sounds of kibble crunching were heard coming from the dining hall. A surreptitious look around the doorway revealed Maddy eating out of Bailey's bowl, with Bailey looking benignly on...

Since the end of camp, reports have trickled in that Bailey has not needed to be on her run since she nicely tires herself out swimming for sticks her owner throws from shore. And a series of unofficial “day camp” sessions have been set up in the fall for more doggie socializing and the opportunity for each to work on her Advanced Sharing Badge.

Camp Auntie Brenda may be officially closing for the season, but the accomplishments of the summer resonate joyfully in memory: from watching a young niece gamely hike her first pack down a portage, and helping a young nephew hone his paddling strokes, to the sights and sounds of two pink-tongued pups tagging and tumbling over each other – and being exuberantly themselves. Happy campers all.



The two dogs share a quiet moment digging in the sand.