

If you want to be a volunteer search dog handler

Prepared by Richard Schaffer
Linville Falls, NC
Tel. 828-765-0340 or 828-265-6307

*Always remember this advice:
Train with as many experienced handlers and instructors as you can,
listen to their advice,
but take from them only what is right for you and your dog, and leave the rest.*

Don't expect a career

Outside of law enforcement, corrections, private security, and a few very limited commercial applications, your chance to handle a search dog is likely to be on a volunteer basis. If you are currently involved in fire and rescue, you probably should not consider becoming a handler as a career move. There are better ways to further your career. If you are a student, or working to support a young family, it may not be the right time in your life to make a commitment to K9 search . . . or to a new puppy. And working a dog is not for everyone. It takes a tremendous commitment, a lot of time in training, a lot of time away from family, and some expense. And if you have no experience in emergency services, but would like to train a search dog, keep in mind that you will be expected to become part of a professional community, and that requires considerable classroom hours and training. If you are a dog breeder wanting to certify a dog, or if you want to "do something" with your dog, then it may be better for you to consider K9 agility classes or certifying your dog in tracking through a dog club. Emergency services may not be for you. However, if you would enjoy the personal satisfaction of helping others, and the camaraderie of being part of a K9 unit, then working a search dog may be for you. Remember, volunteer handlers never charge for the work they do!

What will really be expected of me?

In a nutshell, you will attend classes, training, and spend a lot of time away from home. There is also the cost of equipment, and a whole lot of gasoline and mileage on your vehicle! The biggest difference between volunteering in fire and rescue, and becoming a dog handler, is that well qualified dog teams must be available to travel to searches throughout the region. There are usually not enough searches in any one county to keep a team motivated to train and busy enough to justify the years of work. Also, training and working a search dog requires a "critical mass" of people who are as interested and committed as you are, who are training together, and willing to hide in the woods for hours on end (and who can talk all their family and friends into doing the same). This means that if you want to be a handler, you MUST be a part of a dedicated K9 unit whose members are usually spread over several counties. So you likely will have to travel some distance to regular training. In addition, many handlers use their vacation time to travel to national seminars for advanced training. Another difference between working dogs and volunteering with a fire department or rescue squad is that most fire and rescue incidents are over relatively quickly. Searches go on much longer. Searches that require dog teams may go on for several days, after local resources have been exhausted. In addition, most searches will be out of your county (with travel at YOUR EXPENSE). Most handlers do have families and jobs; so you may find yourself having to juggle a lot of obligations. Without a 100 percent family backing, long terms success rates are low. One more thing: because of the commitments in time and money, the most successful married handlers are those whose spouses are equally involved.

Oh, there's one more thing. Since you will train and work often in wilderness settings, there are hours spent outdoors in all weather conditions, working your dog in the woods, crossing streams, and crawling through the rhododendrons and briars. You may be hiding out there for hours while other teams try to locate you, as it works both ways. You will never be out of contact, and team safety is the priority. But you should be comfortable in the woods or willing to "expand your comfort zone".

What can I do with my dog?

Volunteer teams can serve as a resource to law enforcement, fire, rescue, or emergency management agencies. Typical searches might involve lost or missing hikers, hunters, children, boaters, despondents, Alzheimer's patients, or others in need. Most wilderness search dog teams generally do not work building collapse, unless the team is trained in cadaver and human remains detection (not covered in this document). If you specifically want to work a dog for a FEMA task force, which are made up of civilian volunteers also, you should contact federal and state emergency management agencies for information. Volunteer teams typically do not track criminals, except in very limited situations. However, dog teams (especially cadaver teams) may frequently be involved in criminal cases or in searches where criminal activity is later discovered.

Should I train my dog to be scent discriminating?

All of the dog teams that we train at Linville-Central are trained from their first day to be scent discriminating. Scent discriminating dogs use a scent article obtained from the home, vehicle, or possessions of the missing person. Training a dog to be scent discriminating takes advantage of the canine ability to distinguish between millions of scents distilled to parts per trillion (for certain substances). The result is a dog that is far more reliable in the field when looking for a specific lost subject. Imagine working a search area that has been contaminated by dozens of firefighters, sheriff deputies, family members, neighbors, trail hikers, ATVs, and other searchers. Imagine working in urban or suburban areas, around farms, or on busy hiking trails. For most of us, this includes most searches. Only a scent discriminating dog can be reliable under these conditions. Of course, non-scent discriminating dogs are used in avalanche work, or in a large scale building collapse (such as a terrorist bombing). They are also used in law enforcement where "bite" dogs, often working on-leash, are pursuing the hottest track where a subject has jumped and run, and where there may not be time to obtain a scent article. But scent discrimination is the "gold standard" for wilderness search dogs. One other point- not too long ago we were hiking with our dogs on a remote trail off of the Blue Ridge Parkway. On the way in we met a man coming out of the trail carrying what was obviously a bag of poached galax. We continued in for an hour or so, then turned and returned toward our vehicle. When we reached the spot where we had met the poacher, we started our shepherd, with no scent article. We simple clicked and pointed to the ground and gave the start command. The dog successfully tracked an hour to the vehicle, traveled along the parkway to a stone bridge, crossed over the parkway and travelled down to a crowded parking area to a point where obvious footprints entered a vehicle that had stopped to pick him up. To this experienced scent discriminating dog, who knew what the handler was asking, a scent article was not even needed. It was an interesting test for a scent discriminating dog. There is no good reason to train any other way.

Why should I join an emergency services agency or recognized search dog group?

There is no such thing as "freelance search and rescue". If you want to be a "resource" to law enforcement, fire, rescue, or emergency management agencies, then you should have an affiliation with an organization that they recognize and that they've relied on successfully in the past. Your organization can provide required worker's compensation insurance and access to emergency services radio equipment and frequency licenses. Moreover, membership in a fire, rescue, law enforcement, or other emergency services organization may give you tuition free access to many community college classes and training that you will almost certainly need.

What are the best breeds for search and rescue, and when can I start my dog?

The process of starting a search dog begins with the dog's selection. The choice of breeds depends on the handler's preference, and also on the type of training and the job to be done. Here are some of the factors that handlers look at in choosing a dog breed and in a dog: It should be large enough to cover large areas of territory easily but perhaps not so large you can't evacuate the dog in an emergency. It should have a high play drive, a strong desire to please its handler, and show absolutely no hostility or fear of people. It should be well socialized. Retrievers and herding dogs (including shepherds) are preferred by many handlers, who utilize the retrieve and herding drive in training. Bloodhounds usually serve a specific purpose: locating or following a known track, and almost always on-leash. Many different breeds can be used successfully, and the ultimately you should choose a dog compatible with you and your lifestyle. Consider a breed with a longer coat only if you work in a cold climate; shorter haired breeds do much better in warmer climates and in the summer. If you

prefer adopting a “rescued” dog (from a humane shelter), do so carefully. It’s important to evaluate the parents, which you may not be able to do with rescued dogs. And it is important to be able to evaluate an entire litter, and pick the “best candidate” puppy from among them all. If you bring the puppy home at 7 weeks, then puppy training can begin just as soon as the dog has bonded to the handler, and has completed the entire series of vaccinations – including all parvo shots. While some K9 units around the country wait until the dog is a year old to start training, I think they miss the puppy’s most valuable and impressionable period, when the puppy is learning to play. And they have to undo all the bad habits the dog (and handler) has learned during that time. Most importantly, choose a breed with a good disposition with strangers and children, and known for its good nature and friendly character.

How is a search dog trained?

There is a whole lot more for a new handler to learn than there is for the dog, so that is where the focus should be. In fact, it can take years to become a good handler. The objective of training is to produce a handler and scent discriminating dog that can work as a team. The handler must understand how to deploy the dog in an assigned mission, be able to “read” the dog, learn to trust the dog, and be able to explain to search managers what the dog has done and why. The team will start by learning “tracking”, and progress to “air scenting”. They will learn various techniques and how to work in different environments and terrain. They will train toward many objectives, such as finding a subject’s direction of travel, or “clearing” a sector of land in an “area search”. They may search inside buildings and homes, along roadways, along streams, in farm country, or deep in the woods. They will be taught to work off leash, but to work on leash when the situation warrants. Sometime after the dog is a year old, the team will have a series of evaluations under realistic circumstances in both tracking and area search. The objective is to produce a dog and handler team of proven reliability – one that can be relied on by search managers. Dogs should be well mannered, and trained to a moderate level of obedience, although some groups require more obedience than others.

And so, I’ll repeat my initial advice. Train with as many experienced handlers and instructors as you can, listen to their advice, but take from them only what is right for you and your dog, and leave the rest.

And here are some of the details. . .

Characteristics needed to be a search dog handler

You should. . .

1. Have the personality and attitude to be a patient and loyal friend to your K9 partner.
2. Have a dedication to helping others and for search and rescue work.
3. Have the time and resources to attend searches and training for hours and maybe even days at a time.
4. Comply with professional standards of conduct for handlers and rescue personnel.
5. Be physically able to be in the field for 4-6 hour missions in mountainous terrain.
6. Be comfortable operating in a wilderness or mountain setting in all weather conditions.
7. Be willing to submit to a background check.
8. Show a willingness to “expand your comfort zone”.

What classes are required or recommended?

Of course, each department or organization will have its own requirements for membership separate from being a dog handler. For example, you may be required to obtain a Technical Rescuer, EMT, or other state certification. This document does not address these requirements. But for K9 search, the following courses are helpful, and may be required.

1. *Fundamentals of Search and Rescue* should be the first class you take.
2. *Wilderness Technical Rescuer* certification or classes - the coming standard for SAR personnel.
3. *Technical Rescuer* (formerly Rescue Technician) general classes will be helpful.
4. Healthcare Provider CPR
5. NIMS 100, 200, 700, 800, 809 (National Incident Management System)
6. A basic crime scene preservation class.

7. Other classes in search or rescue needed to gain the skills described below.

Functional search skills

1. Principles of incident command.
2. Principles of ground search, including clue awareness, hasty search, types of search, attraction, containment, determining a probability of detection, basic SAR forms, and more.
3. Basic level of mantracking or sign cutting.
4. Awareness of lost person behavior statistics and profiles, their uses and limitations.
5. Basic level skills in map, compass, and land navigation (see below).

Specialized skills for handlers

1. Demonstrate respect, kindness, and professionalism in caring for and handling their canine partners.
2. Demonstrate that they understand the working relationship between dog and handler; that they have learned to "read" and communicate with their dog in the field; and that they are able to "trust" their dog.
3. Understand principles of scent theory.
4. Demonstrate competency in K9 tracking, air scenting, and area search, and search strategies.
5. Understand search dog procedures, and the management of search dog operations.
6. Ability to serve as crew chief on a search mission, and to be responsible for team effectiveness and the success of the mission.
7. Understand and agree to all rules for the conduct and handling of dogs at searches, during trainings, and during any contact with the public.
8. Maintain and keep on file all current records of all canine vaccinations and health certificates.
9. Understand how to keep a K9 training log, and how to document training and track dog development.

General knowledge and skills

1. Be familiar with SAR responsibilities in North Carolina.
2. Understand safety issues in mountain and wilderness SAR, including safety in working as support in high angle incidents, and in working along rivers and bodies of water.
3. Be prepared to prevent and deal with outdoor and environmental emergencies, such as heat and cold related emergencies, water purification, appropriateness of quick-dry clothing, footwear, and equipment.
4. Understand proper conduct of personnel as it relates to law enforcement, the family of the missing subject, and the media.
5. Understand the role of the news media and dissemination of public information in SAR.
6. Understand basic legal concepts of SAR, including implied consent, negligence, abandonment, Good Samaritan, issues related to search and seizure, entering of private property, etc.
7. Understand and comply with all policies regarding HIPAA and privacy laws.
8. Be comfortable traveling and navigating in the woods or wilderness at night.
9. Understand how people become lost in the wilderness, and factors bearing on survival, including physical and psychological.
10. Understand methods of signaling in the wilderness.
11. Be capable of emergency bivy and basic survival skills in all weather conditions, alone and with patient.
12. Basic training or experience in patient packaging, litter rigging, transport, and carry-outs.
13. Basic training in LZ site selection, preparation, helicopter safety, and the role of helicopters in SAR.
14. Know how to obtain scent articles and other issues related to scent contamination.
15. Understand principles of incident command and functions of the IC staff.

Land navigation and mapping skills

Land navigation are critical to success in search and necessary to survival in the wilderness. At a search, it is needed to understand and carry out your assignment and to debrief command afterwards. It is essential to know where you are at all times so that you can report your location and status to command, call in resources to a patient, evacuate a patient quickly, or navigate quickly and safely in unknown areas. The following skills are essential for search and for your personal survival. You should:

1. Have basic skills in using a map, compass, and GPS technology, and their use in SAR.
2. Be able to read and interpret a topo map and geographic features.
3. Be able to work with both UTM and USNG (national grid) systems.
4. Understand GPS technology in search and rescue, and its limitations.
5. Be able to determine your map coordinates using a location on a topo map and, separately, a GPS.
6. Be able to navigate a bearing, by day or night, in an unfamiliar wilderness environment using a map and compass, without a GPS.
7. Be able to take a bearing in the field and translate it to a map, and take a bearing on a map and translate it to the field.
8. Be able to measure distances by stride in the field.
9. Be able to receive a search assignment and to plot that on a topo map and translate to actual mission.
10. Be able to translate a search mission onto a topo map during debriefing.

Medical training

Handlers may have different levels of medical competencies. As examples, handlers may take courses in wilderness first aid, wilderness first responder (WFR), firefighter emergency medical care, medical responder, EMT, or higher. All personnel should have CPR, and understand how to avoid common outdoor emergencies, including the prevention of heat and cold related injuries, water purification, and appropriateness of clothing, footwear, and equipment.

Canine first aid

Handlers should have a basic understanding of veterinary first aid and safe animal care. The handler must recognize the symptoms and provide first aid for the following conditions or demonstrate the following techniques: Techniques for muzzling, bleeding control, hypothermia and hyperthermia, dehydration, shock, bloat, poisoning, immobilizing and splinting leg fractures, carry and other evacuation techniques for dogs, and be able to state which common human medications are inappropriate for dogs.

© Copyright 2011-2013 by Richard Schaffer