

Search and Rescue Dogs and the Ground Searcher

By Deborah Palman, Maine Warden Service

How Search and Rescue Dogs Work

Search and rescue (SAR) dogs come in two basic types: air sent dogs or ground scent (tracking) dogs. Air scent dogs generally search for the lost subject or their fresh, air born scent in a direct manner, so they are deployed at the direction of their handler in a hasty search mode or in grid searches designed to cover large blocks of ground. The strategy of the handler is similar to that of a ground searcher, except that the area covered by the dog is dependent on wind direction and other weather factors.

Tracking or ground search dogs are utilized at or near the PLS (Point Last Seen) or LKP (Last Known Point) to follow the subject's track or path of travel that consists of scent left on the ground. Once the tracking dog acquires the track, the handler's job is to follow the dog and support the dog in its effort to follow the subject. Performing SAR tracking requires a dog well trained in scent discrimination that can follow old tracks that are often heavily contaminated by relatives and other searchers. Contamination makes their job harder but not impossible if the team is well trained.

The area around the PLS or a clue site is particularly important to search planners, investigators and tracking dog handlers. A PLS or clue site is also potentially part of a crime scene. Securing the area and sending unnecessary people away helps to preserve this evidence as well as minimize contamination for tracking dog teams. An exception to this rule would be to keep people who have contaminated the area available or present so that they can be eliminated by a tracking dog when the dog starts its track.

Air scent dogs are less affected by contamination because they are looking for the subject more directly and are not following a track. Some may follow fresh tracks to a subject if the subject is the only one leaving scent in an area. But, in general, air scent dogs don't discriminate. They are trained to locate anyone in the search area. Unlike tracking dogs, air scent dogs are routinely deployed off lead and may work a long way out of sight of their handler, especially if they are following a scent. Once they find someone, they are trained to stay and bark at the subject or to return to their handlers and lead the handler back to the person.

Ground searchers who encounter an air scent or off lead dog without a handler (the dog should be wearing an ID vest and usually

has a bell) should immediately stop and hold their position so the dog can return to the handler and bring the handler back. The ground searchers might also call the handler on the radio to let the handler know the dog is or has been with them. Otherwise the handler and dog may spend considerable time and energy trying to catch up with the ground searchers. It is also possible that the dog first came to the area following the lost subject's scent and then encountered the ground searchers, so the handler and ground searchers will need to make plans to search the immediate area.

Ground searchers may encounter an off lead police K-9 team from a local police agency at a search. Not all of these police K-9s are friendly and their use at searches run by the Maine Warden Service is rare, but it could happen, especially in southern Maine. In this case, remaining still is the best way to make contact with the handler and keep ground searchers safe.

The same rule of stopping and remaining quiet applies to encounters with tracking dogs. Some of these teams may also be local law enforcement teams. Tracking dogs are usually deployed on lead, so the handler is usually with the dog. The dog should be following the lost subject's scent, but sometimes they get started on the wrong track, so the dog might be following a ground searcher's scent. Well-trained tracking dogs will indicate the person they are tracking and pass by others. So ground searchers should stop and let the tracking dog team pass by or check them out. Even if the tracking dog stops tracking and indicates it is tracking a ground searcher, this is valuable information because the handler now knows they have been tracking the wrong person.

When working a dog, dog handlers have to concentrate on what the dog is telling them. A good handler will not talk a great deal to other searchers when he or she has to concentrate on what the dog is doing, so don't think the handler is ignoring you personally. The handler is responsible for the care and support of their dog, keeping the dog out of trouble with other dogs and people, so the handler may not be able to interact fully with others until the dog is safely secured.

If you see a dog that appears to be in distress or alerting on a victim or clue, if possible, contact the handler or let another dog handler know before you take action yourself. Most volunteer SAR dogs are friendly, but not all law enforcement K-9s can be approached by strangers.