



Kelly Pontbriand prepares to demonstrate how her 2-year-old border collie, Drift differentiates between human scents during outdoor survival training for kids at Camp Beech Cliff on Saturday. PHOTO BY AMANAT KHULLAR

## Getting ‘found’ when lost takes skill, couple says

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MOUNT DESERT — Twenty-six years ago when an 80-year-old man went missing while on a hunting trip in Wyoming, the team of Kelly and Ed Pontbriand and their search-and-rescue dog was called upon for help.

After hours of an unavailing search in heavy snow and temperatures around 20 degrees, it was about time for the team to turn around, when their border collie began to claw at a pile of snow and found a rifle buried underneath.

“Because of that, we continued and found him,” said Kelly Pontbriand. “He had already been out two nights, and he was hypothermic. Probably wouldn’t have survived the third night.”

The couple has been supervising search-and-rescue missions since 1985. As part of the Acadia Winter Festival at Camp Beech Cliff on Saturday, March 5, they led a demonstration on how to be found if you’re lost.

About a half dozen young children and their parents joined the Gouldsboro couple as they shared suggestions on safe hiking practices.

“When people go out in national parks, sometimes they lose the trail and get lost,” said Ed Pontbriand, offering precautions for hikers.

“Being familiar with the area you’re hiking is a good thing, and staying together as a group is important,” he said. “If you’re going to be hiking by yourself, it’s good to let someone know where you’re going.”

Pulling open a bright red rucksack, the retired park ranger fished out the essential items one should carry on an excursion in the woods.

“Have something bright in color, like a bandana,” he said. The list should also include a water bottle, whistle, raincoat, a flashlight, extra snacks and food and a bright coat. “It doesn’t take very much to carry all this stuff. But if you have those items and you end up getting stuck out after dark, then you have a much better chance of having us find you.”

Even with all the right precautions and the vital materials, when a hiker loses their way, the search-and-rescue dog handler, Kelly Pontbriand, gets to work.

“Not every dog can be a search dog,” she said, explaining that to fit that description, the animals are required to have certain special traits. “They have to be high-drive dogs that are always driven to work. They have to be kind of crazy, the kind that likes to play ball all the time and never wants to stop. They’re not necessarily the best pets.”

Most importantly, these dogs need to be able to interact well with their handler – the person who trains and conditions them to work one on one.

When on their search mission, the team of a search dog and a handler often deals with odd situations, explained Kelly Pontbriand. She has had to transport her dogs on helicopter, in backpacks, on ATVs and even snowmobiles.

“They have to be able to deal with all these things. We have to do a lot of work to get them nice and solid to be able to ignore all kind of interesting things, like other dogs, while searching. That’s the important part – their obedience.”

Search dogs, which are trained for anywhere from one to three years, are taught to seek out any human scent on the wind. When the dog locates the missing person, or a vital clue, such as a missing person’s belongings, they are trained to alert.

Tycho, the couple's 8-year-old border collie, begins to wag its tail and barks loudly when it locates someone, but the behavior of some rescue dogs could be much more subtle – like a slight lift of the nose.

“When she's working with the dog, she can see those little, tiny and subtle changes in the dog's behavior,” said Ed Pontbriand. “It may not be evident to anyone else, but she will be able to pick it up.”

Whether it requires combing through a dark and vast cave or braving below freezing temperature in a snowstorm, their work frequently poses them with a range of challenges.

“You get presented with a very serious problem – someone's lost. It becomes the classic mystery, and you interview people and start digging into who the person is, what they would do under stressful situations,” said Ed Pontbriand. And always, they have to race the clock to find someone in time. “You're always trying to hope you're going to find them alive.”