

National Association for Search and Rescue (nasar.org): SAR Dog Fact Sheet

Dog teams have a very special role in the world of search and rescue. The dogs' ultra-sensitive hearing, night vision, endurance and keen sense of smell have continually proven to be invaluable in the effort to locate missing persons. Because of their extraordinary abilities, dogs are often able to reduce the time spent searching, thereby increasing the chances that the mission persons will be found alive. A search dog's success stems from the fact that every human being has a smell -- not detectable by human beings, but discernible by animals -- which is caused by the constant stream of skin rafts and bacteria shed from the human body. How this scent is detected by the animals is dependent upon the training they have had in trailing or air scenting techniques. In both cases, the search dogs are able to locate missing persons even if they are hidden from view. Experts estimate that a single dog team can be as effective as 20 to 30 trained human searchers in locating a missing person in a given period of time.

Air Scenting Search Dog Units

When someone is reported lost or overdue, volunteer search and rescue (SAR) dog teams are available to respond, day or night, to help in the search effort. SAR dogs can find :

Children lost in the wilderness, parks or hidden in shrubbery around houses
Old people who have wandered away from homes and hospitals
Hikers and hunters lost in the woods
Victims of drowning accidents
Victims of avalanche, earthquake, flood, explosion, fire, train wrecks, plane crashes, tornadoes and other disasters

Evidence of crime and the bodies of homicide victims
Volunteer SAR dog units search under the direction of law enforcement and emergency services agencies, at no cost to the agency. Units will not respond to requests by private individuals, and will not respond to known criminal searches that may present a threat to dog or handler.

How do SAR dogs work?

All humans, alive or dead, constantly emit microscopic particles bearing human scent. Millions of these are airborne and are carried by the wind for considerable distances. The air scenting SAR dog is trained to locate the scent of any human in a specific search area. The dog is not restricted to the missing person's track and can search long after the track is obliterated. Many air scenting search dogs are also trained in trailing/scent discrimination.

Upon arrival at the search site, dog handlers work directly for their unit's operations leader, who reports to the search boss or incident commander of the local agency. Many units provide their own base camp operation, with trained radio operators, SAR dog advisors, and other support personnel. After initial hasty searches of trails and paths, each dog/handler team is usually assigned a segment of the search area to cover systematically. Handlers work their dogs downwind of the section assigned to them or cover the area in a way that provides dogs with the best scenting coverage. Handlers map the area they have covered and report their POD (probability of detection) to the plans section or operations leader upon completing their assignments.

Search dogs can work in areas where other searchers have been, and they can work with other search resources, such as mantrackers. Using scent articles, they can discriminate for the missing person in heavily populated areas. They can work day or night, in most kinds of weather, and are especially effective where human sight is most limited -- in the dark, in dense woods or heavy brush, in debris (as found in earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes) and under water.

What are the requirements for SAR dogs and their handlers?

SAR dog handlers must enjoy working with dogs and being in the outdoors in all kinds of weather. They must be physically fit and able to respond to emergencies. They must become proficient in land navigation, map and compass, radio communications, wilderness survival, and first aid. (Most units require a minimum of Advanced First Aid with CPR.)

Requirements for the SAR dog include trainability, agility, endurance, and the ability to get along with other dogs and people. A search dog is a valued member of his handler's family, and he regards people as his friends. SAR dogs are usually the larger

working and sporting breeds of dogs. German Shepherds, Dobermans, Rottweilers, Golden Retrievers, Giant Schnauzers, and Labradors are among the breeds found on SAR unit rosters.

Most handlers prefer to begin training a young puppy. However, an older dog may be suitable if the dog has already developed a good working relationship with his owner. Dogs trained for police service, protection, security, Schutzhund, and the like, can be used in SAR work, as long as they are trained not to bite except on command, and are nonaggressive during searches and when finding a person. There is no place in lost person search for an overly aggressive dog.

It normally takes a year of training — at least twice a week — before a dog/handler team is mission-ready. All units evaluate a candidate team's search proficiency before fielding them on actual missions.

Where are SAR dog units located?

At present, there are over 150 air scenting search dog units around the country, from Alaska to Georgia and from Maine to California. New units are continually being formed. While specific training methods and operating procedures may vary from unit to unit, the basic concept of searching with air scenting dogs is quite uniform (based on the pioneering work of Bill Syrotuck). Such uniformity enables SAR-responsible agencies to know what to expect when they request search dogs, and to know how to best deploy them in the field. It also enables teams from different units to work together on large-scale searches.

Standardization is furthered by books such as the American Rescue Dog Association's Search and Rescue Dogs; Susan Bulanda's READY! The Training of the Search and Rescue Dog; and Lue Button's Practical Scent Dog Training; by seminars put on by handlers from established units to help a new unit become organized and trained; by exchange of information among handlers at the Annual Conference of the National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR) and various Search Dog Seminars; and by the work of the NASAR SAR Dog Section.

Experience has shown that it is difficult to train a dog and handler team for search and rescue without meeting and working with other people in the same endeavor. We encourage prospective SAR dog handlers to contact an established, reputable unit for guidance in getting started in search dog work.

Are SAR Dogs considered service animals which are allowed in public places?

In most areas SAR K-9's are allowed the same access as police or service K-9's. Having said this, a SAR K-9 in training is NOT considered the same as an operational SAR K-9. Another consideration is the reason the SAR K-9 is in the public area (Demonstration, booth, informational, team promotion, award, etc.). SAR Dog Trainees should not be brought into public places without cause. We have seen ADA dogs in training that were in public places but only after receiving permission, as being in such places was required for their training.

Remember that anyone can buy a SAR Dog vest and place it on their family pet (OKC Federal building incident proved this). Please do not abuse the privilege afforded to the operational SAR K-9's by taking your trainee to a public event or commercial establishment without gaining permission first, lest you give all SAR K-9's a bad name. This includes hotels and eating establishments as well.

We realize you need to train your SAR K-9 trainee for crowds, machinery, elevators, etc. Have your team help by providing booths at events that will allow you and your K-9 the training you need. It will also allow your K-9 to witness other K-9's experiencing the same distractions and will help reduce the stress involved. One final note, when the public approaches your trainee to pet and love them, be sure that you are at the head of your partner with a grip on the collar and watch for any signs of stress or discomfort in them. You should also limit the approach to one person at a time. Children love to swarm around a cute dog and the all want to hug him at the same time. This can cause a protective reaction in even the best trained dog, so always be sure you K-9 has an "escape path" open to walk away if they feel threatened.