

# Search and Rescue K-9s

**What dog breeds are good for search and rescue?** Good play/prey drive, fitness to handle conditions, sound temperament and extensive obedience training.

Throw a ball into the bushes for your dog. How long does he look for it? If he gives up within a few minutes, chances are, your dog won't make the cut. Does he obsess on it for hours afterward, scratching at the door to get back out to continue looking, or crashing through the bushes looking for it, destroying your garden and digging up all your good dirt in the process? Probably a good search dog right there.

**HUMAN SCENT** - All humans have an individual scent left behind by the 40,000 skin cells dropped per minute. These dropped skin cells, called skin rafts, look like tiny potato chips and float easily on air currents. Temperature, humidity, sun exposure, and wind determine how long a skin raft can be detected. The hotter and drier the day, the shorter the life of the skin rafts. Some recent studies suggest that the dog is picking up gas emitted by a human in addition to skin rafts. Search dogs should be called as quickly as possible to a search scene before human odor dissipates.

**AIR SCENT DOG** - The air scent dog is the type most frequently encountered. The air scent dog works off lead, ranging back and forth in an area to pick up the scent left by the subject. Ranging often takes the dog out of sight for several minutes at a time, so the handler must trust the dog and listen for an alert. Once the dog gets the subject's scent, he moves in to its source. He then must "alert" by either barking while staying with the subject or by returning to the handler and "telling" her in some way that she should follow. The dog then leads the handler to the subject. This dog will not normally discriminate scents, so there is the possibility of a "false alarm" if other people (searchers, citizens) are nearby. Air scent dogs work best in situations such as remote wilderness, large parks or private lands that are closed at the time, since the dog will home in on any human scent. The best conditions for air scent dogs to work are early mornings or late afternoons on cool, cloudy days when there is a light wind.

**TRACKING/TRAILING DOG** - The tracking dog works from a scent article from the subject, such as a piece of clothing or an item touched only by the subject. From this article, the dog picks up the subject's scent and uses it to find the subject's path. He works in a harness on a 30-50 foot lead and leads his handler directly to the subject by tracing the exact footsteps of the subject. A tracking dog is trained to follow the path of a certain person. It physically tracks the path of the person, without relying on air scenting. This dog is usually worked in a harness and on leash. A tracking dog can be effective early in the search to determine the exact direction of travel of the subject. The trailing dog works similarly to the tracking dog. A scent article is used so the dog can pick up the subject's scent and trail. The dog may waiver from the person's actual track by several feet, cutting corners and using the wind to his advantage. Again, the dog is generally in a harness with a 20-30 foot lead. The trailing dog will frequently have its "nose the ground," unlike the air scent dog.

**Securing search articles for a tracking or trailing search dog:** The item should be placed in a plastic bag and should never be touched by the searcher or law enforcement. Use plastic gloves or turn the bag inside out and grab it. Clothing is best and pick something heavy in scent like socks or a baselayer the subject recently wore. Alternatives to scent articles might be the subject's tent or car parked at a trailhead. If there is a good scent article and a point where the person was last seen, a trailing dog can be the fastest way to find the victim. Without the scent article and a point where the person was last seen, these dogs cannot work effectively

**CADAVER / HRD DOG** - A cadaver dog, also known as a human remains detection (HRD) dog reacts to the scent of a dead human. The dog can be trained for above ground and buried cadaver searches. Although many dogs have the potential to detect human scent, whether dead or alive, the cadaver dog is trained to locate only human remains.

**DISASTER DOG** - A disaster dog, which starts training as an air scent dog, is trained to find human scent in very unnatural environments, including collapsed structures and areas effected by earthquakes, tornadoes and other disasters. This dog is trained to work on unstable surfaces, in small, confined spaces and other settings not usually found in the wilderness.

**WATER SEARCH DOG** - A water search dog is trained to detect human scent that is in or under the water, focusing on the scent of the bodily gases that rise up. As a team, the handler and dog usually work in a boat or

along the shoreline. Because of currents and general changes in the water, it can be hard to pinpoint the location of a body.

**AVALANCHE DOG** - An avalanche search dog is trained to detect human scent that is in or under snow, subsequent to an avalanche. These dogs are trained to detect the scent under many feet of snow, sometimes, 15 feet or more! Avalanche dogs are air scent trained and learn that a subject may be “underground” i.e., under snow. They dig and/or bark to alert as their goal is to see the person and then tell their handler. An air scent dog would have a similar reaction if someone were buried under talus or rockfall. They would dig and try to physically reach the person. **A dog can search and clear an avalanche the size of a football field in five or 10 minutes. It would take a probe line of 50 people using poles a couple hours to cover the same ground.** When 30 minutes can mean the difference between life and death for a skier lost on a snowy mountain, most people would bank on the dog.

**MOSAR** will often request dogs from outside agencies. When you are paired with a dog handler, it will most often be with a non-team member. **What can you do to help the handler when searching?**

- Ask the handler how you can best help them as a search partner. Never try to pet the dog or call it over to you without express permission.
- Often the handler will want you to be behind them and not in between them and the dog in case it comes in for an alert.
- The handler most often keeps eyes on the working dog. As a partner to a canine handler, you should be looking everywhere else for clues, yelling the subject’s name, communicating to base on your radio for the handler.
- Let the handler decide how to best search the area you were given to clear based on winds, terrain, etc.
- If you notice the dog looks like it’s “in scent” (tail high and wagging, nose in the air, etc.), point it out to the handler. You may discuss before starting what to look for when the dog is in scent. This can be helpful if for example, the handler is looking at their GPS and you notice their dog is doing something out of the ordinary.
- If you find the person, the handler may be busy rewarding the dog and placing it away from the subject. You should assist the subject, provide medical attention and call base to report the find until the dog handler can assist.



**Air Scent Dog**



**Tracking/Trailing Dog**



**Water/HRD Dog**



**Avalanche Dog**