



Above: Anne Wills, founder of Dogs Finding Dogs, with Heidi, her German shepherd-lab mix tracking dog.

Above right: Wills, left, with Heidi, and employee Darlene Sanders of Elkridge, right, with Gretel, walk through Arbour Manor Park in Arbutus.

Bottom right: The vests worn by the service dogs warn that they are to not be touched while working.



Following their noses

Howard County volunteers track missing pets with Dogs Finding Dogs

BY LANE PAGE
PHOTOS BY NATE PESCE

Pet owners used to have just a few options when their animals went missing: Call animal control, call the microchip company or turn to an animal psychic.

In the Mid-Atlantic, we can add a fourth to the list: Call a dog. Dogs Finding Dogs, a nonprofit organization of highly trained tracking dogs and handlers formed in 2008, stands ready to assist with the search.

"We find anything that walks on the ground. We can't do birds, and I won't do snakes," states Anne Wills, founder and executive director of the Halethorpe-based group. The group's volunteer handlers get an object with the missing pet's scent from the owner, introduce it to their tracking dogs and follow the pet's scent until the animal is found.

"We're unique to pretty much the whole U.S.," she adds, noting that there are a few other for-profit trackers in the area, but Dogs Finding Dogs requests merely a nominal donation to cover expenses and support area rescues and shelters.

The group receives some 15 to 20 local requests daily. (The same number come in weekly from across the nation, but for now, all Dogs Finding Dogs can offer is advice.) Trackers are out on the job every day, working closely with animal control officers.

Now, after a year's training, eight new teams, including some Howard County volunteer

trackers, are almost ready to go, making a total of 16 or 17 pairs by the end of 2014. These include Wills and "founding dog" shepherd/Lab mix Heidi, whose "crazy" activity as a pup led to schutzhund training (tracking, obedience and protection), opening the door to a new career for both of them.

Dogs Finding Dogs prefers large dogs because that's what people expect and because small ones would have more difficulty covering the territory. Not just any dogs will do, either; they must have strong hunting drive, be willing to work hard, be highly motivated by toys and of working or hunting breeds.

Wills reports returning about 4,000 pets home (about one-quarter through counseling by phone), a success rate of 94 percent.

Now the organization hopes to expand up and down the East Coast and in states such as Ohio, Texas and California, where there is a large need. **HM**