

# Canine Patrol

## Dogs Finding Pets lives up to its name and then some.

By Joy Freedman



*Anne Wills, of Arbutus, executive director of Dogs Finding Dogs, an organization of dog handlers and their trained dogs that help find lost pets, kneels next to her German shepherd, Gretel.  
Photo by Steve Ruark*

Imagine waking up on a snowy morning and finding that your beloved dog or cat is missing. That's what happened to a family in the Anne Arundel community of Davidsonville when Captain Nemo, their blind, elderly, three-legged schipperke, was missing from their yard.

This is when Dogs Finding Dogs, a Baltimore-based non-profit, was called in to assist with the search. Anne Wills and her famous tracker, Heidi, a lab shepherd mix, searched for more than an hour when Heidi made her way to an icy, cold drainage ditch.

She started barking for Anne and nudged a lifeless body. Suddenly, Captain Nemo lifted his head.

"It was the dead of winter, and I didn't think he was going to make it," Wills recalls. "I started stripping off layers of clothing to wrap him in." Once out of the icy ditch and wrapped tightly in Wills' arms, Captain Nemo went on his way to make a full recovery back home.

Dogs Finding Dogs was founded by Wills in 2008 when she discovered Heidi had a love of tracking. The team would be called on as a "last chance" effort to find a lost pet, and as they say the rest is history. Dogs Finding Dogs now boasts 12 tracking pairs that cover the Mid-Atlantic region and has teams in Texas, Alabama and Georgia. Most of the dogs in the program are rescues, ranging from Belgian malinois/shepherd mixes to terriers.

The average time to track a lost pet is about a week, although some pets have been found safe weeks after their escape. The quicker Dogs Finding Dogs is notified, the easier a pet is to track. Once they get the call, a team is usually sent within 24 hours.

"Most of the time, we are in crisis management mode. Pets are like our children and we are very sensitive to that," says Wills.

During the spring of 2015, Wills recalls, Heidi started acting strange, pushing her nose into Wills' chest, continually pawing, pacing and refusing to leave her side. After a clean bill of health from the veterinarian, Wills decided she should go to her own physician.

A week later, she was told that Heidi had in fact located a tumor in her lung. Six months later, when Wills had completed her surgery and chemo, they were featured on a Christmas week episode of the “Today” show.

“The whole team fawned all over her. She was in her glory,” Wills says. The next day, Heidi went to the vet as she didn’t seem like herself. “The vet called and said she went into cardiac arrest,” Wills tearfully remembers. “I raced to there to see her.”

Sadly, Heidi passed away moments after Wills arrived. An ultrasound revealed a mass located in the same exact spot as Wills’ tumor just six months earlier.

Two programs were started in honor of Heidi — Found by Phone is a free service that immediately starts searching for a missing pet. FBP has a 94 percent success rate and has already reunited over 200 pets with their families.

The other is Heidi’s Hero Foundation, which provides coverage for a pet’s final expenses when a family does not have the means.

Dogs Finding Dogs relies on donations and fundraisers to train, educate and dispatch their teams of handlers.

“Generally, the dogs are ready before their handlers,” Wills says.

Preparation is always the key to a happy reunion, should your pet wander off. Dogs Finding Dogs provided some valuable information.

Gather several items with your pets scent, toys, a blanket, etc.

Take a damp dish towel for each pet, wipe down each of your pets individually, along with gathering a bit of hair, and seal in a Ziploc or airtight bag. This is especially important in multi-pet households where nothing belongs to just one pet.

Keep some of each pet’s fur in a separate baggie and make sure to label it.

For information, contact [www.DogsFindingDogs.com](http://www.DogsFindingDogs.com), on Facebook at Dogs Finding Dogs or by phone 410-908-6374.

*Joy Freedman is a dog behaviorist and obedience instructor. She can be reached at [www.joyfreedman.com](http://www.joyfreedman.com). If you have any pet-related questions, please submit them for a future column*