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Dogs Finding Dogs: A Dog's Nose Knows

**Walking in a Winter
Canine Wonderland**


**Demystifying Spinal
Injuries in Dogs**

Holiday Gift Guide Inside

"Rosa" is available for adoption
through the Virginia German
Shepherd Rescue. (details on page 44)

Anne Willis, DFD Co-Founder with K9
"Heidi" & K9-in-training "Gretl"

Nose knows



Story By Laura S. Jones | Photography by Thomas Pfarr

Hollywood lied. Dogs are vastly more talented than the film studios have led us to believe.

Remember the scenes from the old movies where the panic-stricken jailhouse fugitive runs towards the river so the water will throw the bloodhounds off his scent trail? Wrong, wrong, wrong. As Anne Wills, the founder of Dogs Finding Dogs, explains, a good tracking dog can follow a scent across a body of water because the oil based molecules that make up a scent float. And, well, because dogs are generally awesome. The dogs who make up the canine half of the tracking teams used by Dogs Finding Dogs, though, are more awesome than most thanks to highly specialized training and a strong desire to succeed. Their human companions just have to steer them in the right direction, a task to which Wills has dedicated the second half of her life.

How She Got Started

Speaking of direction, Anne Wills found herself managing a dog-focused non-profit totally by accident, which is of course how all the best things happen in life. All Wills wanted when her kids left the nest was a little companionship, a reason to get out of the house. Thanks to the arrival of a German Shepherd/Labrador puppy with a mission, she got that and a lot more. "I got Heidi at 8 weeks old in 2005," Wills explains, noting she had "zero dog experience be-

fore then." Heidi was happy to take on the role of teacher. "She was extremely high drive. I couldn't sit and watch television for fifteen minutes," Wills remembers.

Wills' boyfriend at the time was a police officer and, noting Heidi's potential, suggested serious training, and fast. Heidi and Wills hustled over to Arrowwood Shepherds, a dog training organization that offers a special type of training needed for tracking and police work called Schutzhund. Schutzhund training includes obedience and protection training as well as tracking training. "Heidi wound up being a fantastic tracking dog," Wills says. (Heidi also has her AKC Canine Good Citizen certificate and has been awarded a Governor's Citation and an Executive Citation for her services to the public with tracking.)

Because of Arrowwood Shepherd's connection to the law enforcement community, the organization would get calls from people who had lost dogs. "But they can't use police dogs to track dogs," Wills explains. One day, Wills was at the facility when a lost dog call came in, and a trainer suggested she take Heidi out and try to help. "Good luck, figure it out," they said to me," Wills remembers. "I had to learn the hard way, but I guess sometimes that is the best way."

That first case was Rosie, a 13-year-old lab who was "so arthritic she could barely walk without her meds, but she still managed to wander off." The fear was that when she missed her next dose of medication, she wouldn't be able to make it home. When Wills and Heidi got to Rosie's home, Heidi sniffed some of Rosie's items and headed for the backyard stream. Wills was nervous. "Heidi was tracking straight up the middle of the stream. I was getting soaked and I thought she was crazy. I thought she wanted to swim instead of work. We did this for four or five minutes, and then, there was Rosie. Water doesn't erase the scent and Heidi was able to follow it." Take that, Hollywood.

Dogs Finding Dogs

Encouraged by her success and touched by the need, Wills gathered a couple of friends together whom she had met at Arrowwood. One thing led to another, and Wills went from being a proud dog mom to the leading resource for lost pets in her community.

Based in Baltimore and formed in 2008, Dogs Finding Dogs is a 501(c)(3), and is the "only official non-profit organization like this in the United States," says Wills. With a suggested donation of \$175 for a search and a policy to do hardship cases for free, Wills and her team of nine dogs and handlers have reunited more than 2,000 families. If you call on

Wills, get your walking shoes and be prepared to be an active part of the search. "We always take the owners with us when we search," Wills says. With Rosie, everyone was traipsing down the middle of the stream following Heidi. "If we do come upon the dog, it won't come to me. And often it runs from the owner too."

Wills' teams can travel within a couple of hundred miles of Baltimore. Fees are designed to cover expenses of the handlers only, many of whom leave work when contacted to help. Wills says they never turn down a plea for help even though they often get multiple calls a day. The goal of Dogs Finding Dogs is simple: to reunite you with your pet as soon as possible. To that end, Dogs Finding Dogs offers more than just tracking teams. Sometimes a panicked pet owner needs to be walked through the steps to take right away, like posting flyers and putting out food.

Wills' particular blend of compassion and skill seems straight out of an episode of "Cagney and Lacey." You get no hysteria from Wills, because hysteria won't find your dog. Before making canine search and rescue a full-time profession and passion, Wills managed a manufacturing company. She says the skills she gained in customer service and scheduling translated very well to her new line of work. "People are understandably often very distraught when they call Dogs Finding Dogs," she says. And to help find their animals, they need to regain their wits. Wills helps them do that and helps them develop an action plan they can implement before a rescue team can get to them. Sometimes, helping the owners understand what to do and how their missing dog will behave is enough to reunite owner and animal.

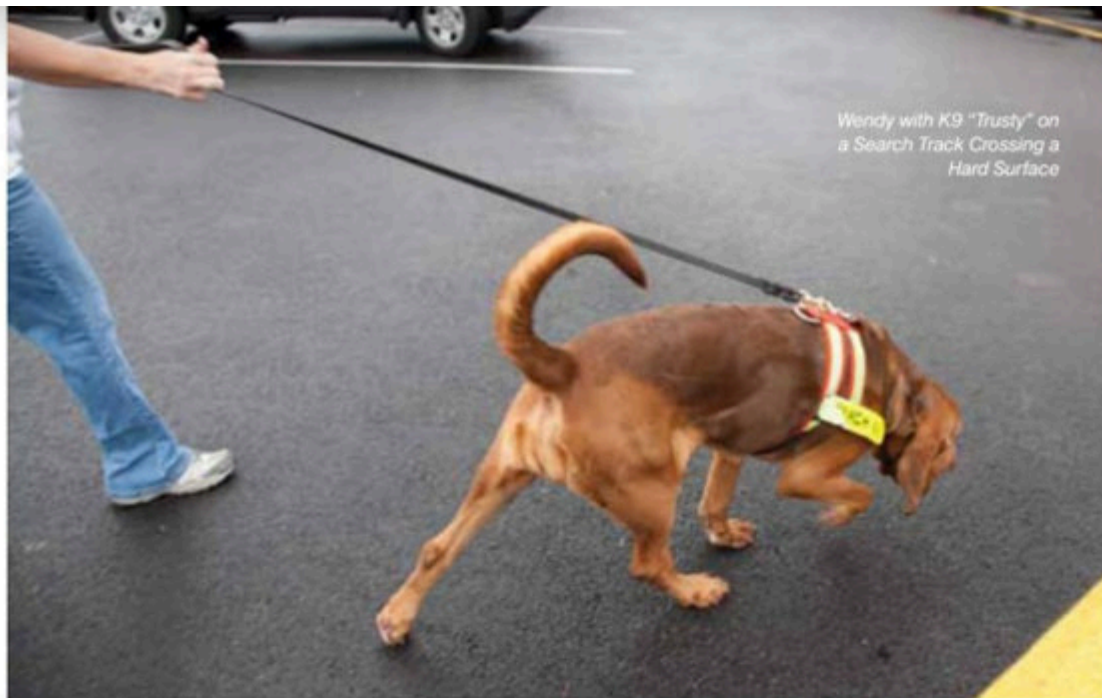
But all who wander are not lost. "Sixty-five to seventy percent of our cases are stolen dogs," Wills says with a matter-of-fact tone that masks a blend of sadness and disgust with the world. She only allows herself and one other tracker to handle those cases. "You need to be experienced and confident as a person to go into some unsafe neighborhoods and the dog has to be very precise and clear with its signals. If the police are going to be able to make a case, they need to have a dog whose behavior can stand up to cross-examination," Wills says.

The Actual Sniffing

So, as a culture, we often imagine tracking dogs as bloodhounds or German Shepherds. But any dog who wants to work can be a good tracking dog, Wills says. The dogs of Dogs Finding Dogs are a

Christine with K9 "Keelah"





Wendy with K9 "Trusty" on
a Search Track Crossing a
Hard Surface

varied lot. There are many German Shepherds and Shepherd mixes, a few hounds and labs, and one gorgeous Doberman. When I think about sniffing and a dog's particular talents, I think about the beagle with his nose to the ground. "Hounds come hard-wired for tracking," Wills agrees. "The problem with a hound is that it may not tell you when the end is—it may jump track to a deer or something else. You have to teach him or her the end game." The hounds, in other words, don't want the game to end and can give confusing signals. If a dog got into a car, and the scent trail ends, the tracking dog should sit or lie down or give some other "game over" signal, Wills says. And dogs need to be taught that skill.

So finding anything—or anyone—is all about a well-trained dog. For a dog to have the potential to be a part of the Dogs Finding Dogs team, it needs:

- A high ball drive, because the ball is the reward, Wills explains. "You can't use food-motivated dogs for tracking work because there is food everywhere."
- A good temperament, meaning dog and cat and people friendly.
- Basic tracking ability and a good hunt drive, which means the dog enjoys the work.

All of the dogs who make up Dogs Finding Dogs have been certified as "Canine Good Citizens" with the AKC CGC program. To stay "in shape," the dog teams also compete in tracking for Schutzhund and AKC. The tracking phase of Schutzhund competition tests not only the dog's scenting ability, but also its mental soundness and physical endurance. When the dog finds each article, he indicates it,

usually by lying down with the article between his front paws. The dog is scored on how intently and carefully it follows the track and indicates the articles. The length, complexity, number of articles, and age of the track varies for each title. Good tracking dogs like Wills' can track over a variety of surfaces and in all kinds of weather.

Additionally, the Dogs Finding Dogs dog teams have obtained certifications in tracking and trailing through the National Tactical Police Dog Association, and one of their trainers works with the dogs to keep them sharp, Wills says. "The president of that association is also on our board," Wills adds with pride. The dogs of Dogs Finding Dogs are clearly the stars in her eyes. And they look for cats, too! But the dogs don't "track" cats. That sounds kind of stressful for the cat, doesn't it? Instead, they follow the scent trail to where a cat has been, which allows the handler to place treats and a trap in an appropriate location.

Wills is looking to expand by reaching out to Schutzhund groups because all dogs have to track to be able to compete, and "training dogs from scratch takes a year and a half."

When Your Dog Goes Missing

When I spoke with Wills, she was managing a rash of new cases, including a missing 25-year-old tortoise. (The tortoise, it turns out, was stolen and her team is still on the case.) She told me that the



most common times for pets to go missing are holidays, parties, thunderstorms, snowstorms, and fireworks. Wills also says the most important thing to remember when searching for your lost dog is that very quickly the dog will "flip" to a natural, instinctive state of mind. "You are essentially looking for a fox. When our pets are with us, we humanize them, we get lax with them. We forget we are dealing with an animal with free will." It's not that your pet doesn't want to come home with you. It's more that it has adapted to its environment. In other words, Fido doesn't know you are looking for him. Wills says calling your dog often doesn't help, he or she needs to smell you. "You have to forget all your experiences with your dog because they all do the same things once they are out."

Wills says it is very important to get flyers posted and to people within a five mile radius. Posting on Craigslist's Lost and Found section (under the Community heading) is also important. Set up feeding stations and note footprints. Then, if a tracking team needs to come out, it knows where to start.

As I write this I am sitting in an overstuffed chair with an overstuffed dog on my lap. His 54 pounds

are exactly where my computer laptop should be. Instead my "lap" top is balanced on my knees, my left arm is under Blue's front paws and my right is resting on his rear end. He smells faintly of whatever he rolled in this morning. His giant bat ears are blocking part of the screen, and I am getting a crick in my neck from bobbing my head from side to side. But I don't care. I haven't spent much time with my boy this week. If Blue ever went missing, my world would end. And then I would remember Anne Wills and Dog Finding Dogs, and I would pick up my phone and call for help.

Part educator, part superhero, part long distance hiker, and all heart, Wills will help you and me find our dogs. Well, actually, it's Heidi who will find our dogs. A dog's nose knows. So when you lose your pet, don't wait. "Dogs run like Forrest Gump," Wills says.

For more detail on what Dogs Finding Dogs does, and how they do it, visit the website, www.dogs-findingdogs.com. There you can also read the individual case files of many successful searches for dogs and cats. Now that makes a perfect Hollywood ending. 🐾

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