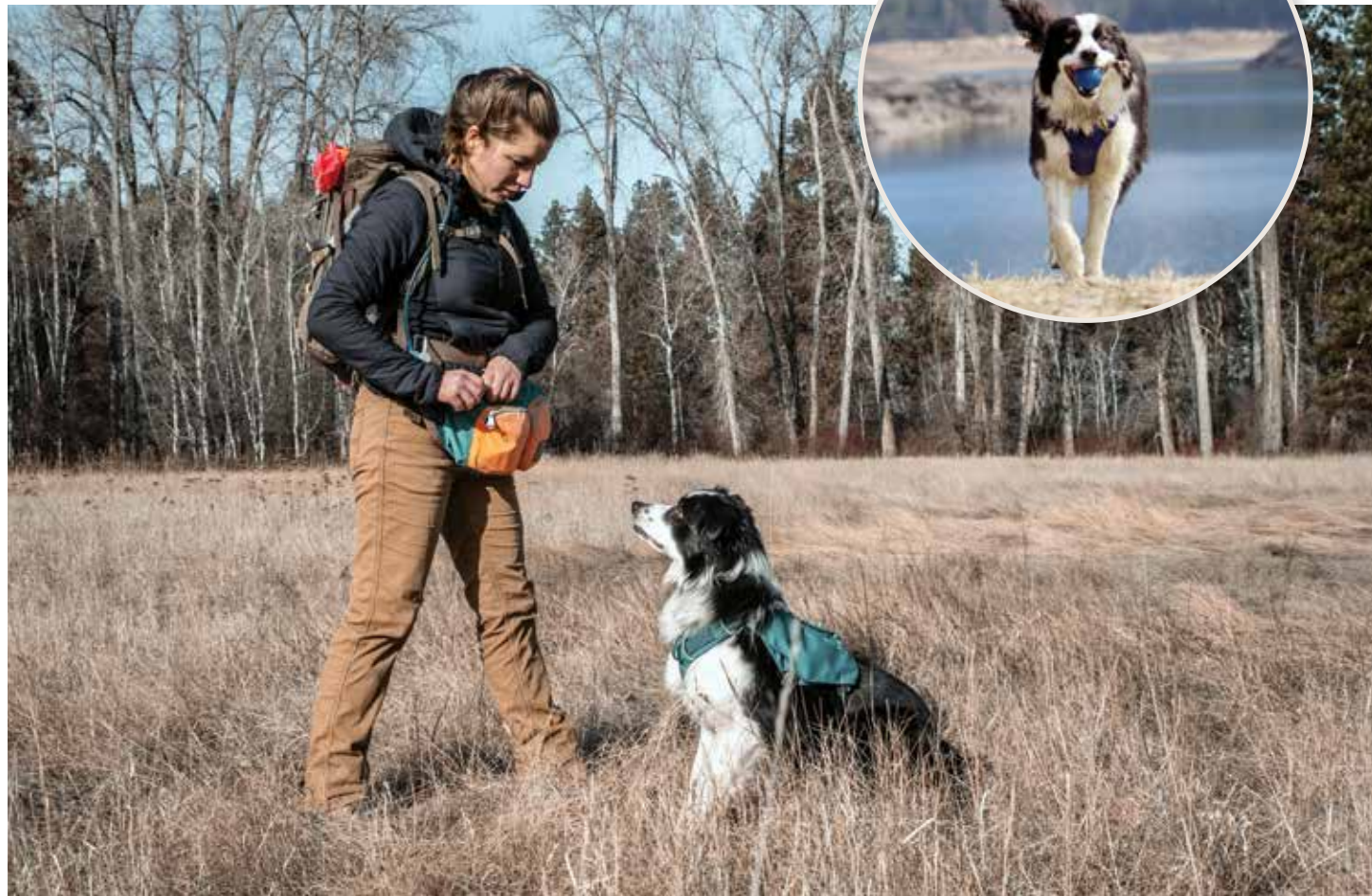




Kayla Fratt and her dog Barley work together during a training session.

WORKING DOGS

A Nose for Good

DRIVE, DESIRE, AND A KNACK FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS MARK A SKILLED CONSERVATION DOG



BY AMY ROBINSON

Starla briefly sniffs the scented glove through the bars of her crate at the Humane Society of Vero Beach & Indian River County. “You are going to find this,” I tell her. She vibrates with excitement. I leave her there and step outside, remove my shoes, and place plastic bags over my feet to mask the scent on my shoes. I then drop the glove about every 6 feet, move about 40 feet in a straight line, curl right 30 feet, then around

a clump of trees, and finally place the glove atop a tire on a parked car. I walk back to my shoes along a different path and retrieve Starla.

Once she is outside, I say, “Find it,” and before I can get the phrase fully out of my mouth, she is dragging me along the track with alacrity. It took me nearly 10 minutes to lay the track, but she finds the glove in 45 seconds.

Shelter dogs can make good working dogs. Many have lots

of energy, stamina, and high drive. Often, they are larger, more athletic dogs, which allows them to work in different types of conditions and weather. “Most of our dogs are shelter dogs,” says Kayla Fratt, cofounder of K9 Conservationists, a nonprofit that trains and deploys dog-and-handler teams to help researchers detect invasive species, wildlife biological samples, and signs of rare or elusive animals.

“Our organization has seven

dogs working on nearly a dozen different projects this year,” Fratt explains. “Some of our teams are stationed in Alaska finding wolf scat for the Island Wolf Project with Oregon State University and Alaska Department of Fish and Game; others are stationed in Wyoming as part of the Painted Blade Project to study bird safety at wind farms.”

A good potential detection dog is identified through criteria that can predict success. “We screen dogs for health issues, including any orthopedic abnormalities that could reduce their comfort in a physically challenging job that can include hazards like difficult terrain, weather, dangerous wildlife, or toxins in the environment,” says Fratt. “To identify potential, we like to see that a dog can ignore distractions and hunt for a lost toy in bushes or tall grass for at least three minutes, several times in a row, without getting distracted or losing focus.”

That desire to search for a

toy until it is found is what convinced dog trainer Gerry-Anna Jones to adopt her husky/German shepherd mix, Echo. “I saw video of him looking for a toy that had been thrown far into a field, and he kept it up for almost three minutes until he found it,” she recalls. “Plus, I’m a sucker for a husky,” she laughs.

Jones is the founder of Goldstar Puppy Academy in Sebastian and the president of the Gopher Tortoise Alliance. She is also permitted by the state of Florida as an apprentice in gopher tortoise rehabilitation. Jones has an eye for talent and thought Echo could learn to search for gopher tortoises for research purposes and relocation from sites slated for development.

“I didn’t work heavily on obedience as soon as I got Echo, which would be my normal procedure,” she explains. “I have learned that if that happens, so much of the dog-handler interaction is the dog looking to me for information.



Gerry-Anna Jones has trained her dog Echo to detect gopher tortoises.

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Ask Amy

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We just moved to a new place, and my dog seems spooked by new things he sees in the house. When we come in from an evening walk, Chase will walk to the sliding glass door very slowly, as if he thinks it is going to bite him. I realize he sees his reflection, but what should I do about it—ignore it or address it? He also hides under the chair in my office, which is something he didn't do at the old house.

- Sheila in Vero Beach



A big change like this can be daunting, especially if Chase is not a young pup. Dogs love routine, so start one that addresses this new fear. Walk right up to the door with him and touch the glass down around his eye level. Tell him, "That's you, Chase!" in a calm, cheerful voice. Then, unclasp his leash and just walk away. You can do this every time you come back from a nightly walk. I'll bet he starts to wag his tail as this becomes a ritual. Hiding under a chair would suggest he wants to observe the layout from a defensible position. Let him have this stealth position in the house, as it may become a favorite spot for him. Chase will pick up on your confident attitude and will soon make himself truly at home.

My dog Harry is getting a bit touchy about being brushed and having his teeth looked at. The other day, he growled loudly when I picked up his paw to wipe it before coming into the house. He is due to be groomed soon. Should I suggest a muzzle? The groomer is great and I don't want to lose him.

- Mason in Melbourne Beach



Lots of otherwise sweet dogs object mightily to being brushed, buffed, probed, and prodded. And nail trims? These are unpopular, to say the least. It is considerate of you to think of a muzzle for your groomer. You will need to introduce it well ahead of the appointment. Choose a basket muzzle in his size. Put treats inside it and lay it down on the floor. Let Harry work on it until the treats are gone. Swiping some cream cheese on it is a great way to show Harry the benefit associated with the muzzle. The next step will have you holding the muzzle for him as he pokes his nose in to get the goodies. Only after he does this willingly at least six times over the course of a couple of days should you even dream of clasp it. Once you decide he is ready for this step, stand at his side so you are facing the same direction, and put it on quickly with no hesitation. This advice assumes his behavior has come up gradually and not all at once. If this happened suddenly, ask the veterinarian to give the dog a good once-over. Bring your muzzle.

TRUE TAILS



Echo puts his nose to the ground for gopher tortoise detection and conservation.

But in scent work, you need the dog to work more independently.”

Jones took a course with Fratt and has trained with Janey Fuller at Cougar Creek K9 in Alabama to hone their skills. “The first thing I taught Echo was to go away from me and target an item over there. I cut up pieces of a Kong for him to find. Once he learned that targeting the Kong piece meant a reward was coming, we were making good progress.”

Scent detection is complicated. “Odor is not where we place it,” states Natalie Duberow, owner of Happy Dog College and Scentwork Central in Grant, Florida. She is also a scent work competition

judge for the American Kennel Club and the United Kennel Club. “Odor drifts, gathers, fractures, and reshapes itself according to air, heat, surface, and time.” The owner or dog handler is not directing the dog’s movement, but rather following the dog’s lead.

“The dog’s potential for detection work reveals itself quietly,” adds Duberow. “A capable dog works without urgency. They move with intention. They slow when the problem deepens and remain engaged even when the handler recedes into stillness.”

There isn’t a breed or body shape that necessarily will predict a good working detection dog. The shape or size of

the dog’s nose doesn’t matter. “What matters most is not the shape of the dog, but the way the dog thinks,” Duberow explains. “The strongest detection dogs are comfortable in uncertainty. They remain curious when the answer is incomplete. Exceptional dogs are not the ones that move the fastest; instead, they listen the longest. The environment is speaking and the dog is translating.”

Jones’ primary goal was for Echo to be a pet first and a detection dog second. He has risen to both of those criteria. “I didn’t want a super-high-drive Malinois that would need a job lasting all day, every day,” she says. What she discovered was that Echo loves the work itself.

“He’s a good communicator. I’ll send him out with a kind of throwing motion, and I have learned that if he makes a loop and comes back to me fairly quickly, there is nothing there.”

Even when she rewards him with play, her dog will soon look for more work. “I think for Echo, the act of searching is the best reward. I’ll throw his ball to celebrate a job well done, and he’ll bring it back a few times, but then he veers off toward where he found something so he can alert on it again, so the game starts anew.”

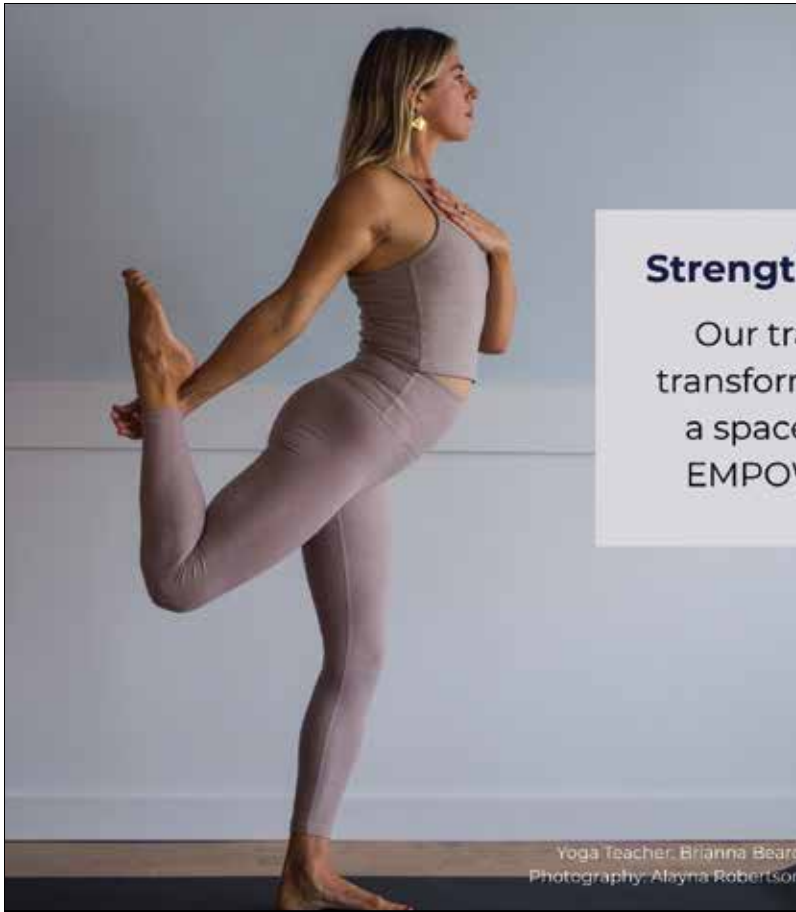
Echo is the only gopher tortoise-detection dog actively working in this area for now, but Jones hopes she will inspire other dog-owner teams in Flor-



Jones’ goal for Echo was to be a family pet first and detection dog second.

ida. “There are definitely uses for detection dogs here,” she says. “There are dogs trained to sniff around marinas and ports for invasive barnacles or mussels clinging to boats. Some even sniff scat on the water from boats, which could

help detect iconic Florida species like manatees,” she adds. “I see an application for dogs to detect panther scat, since they are endangered and very elusive to spot. It’s a matter of finding the right researcher who needs the help.” 🐾



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