



During training in Fairbanks, Fritz demonstrates wilderness search techniques.

Article and  
photos by Cathie Harms

It's a beautiful Saturday morning in Fairbanks. I adjust my fanny pack and unleash Fritz. It's time for a search-and-rescue training session with my experienced canine companion.

"Are you ready, Fuzzy? Do you want to play the game?"

Fritz jumps in the air, turns in a tight circle and barks excitedly at me.

"OK, Fuzz, find him!"

The dog bounds off through the bush keeping one eye on me as his nose checks out the air currents. He settles into a brisk trot and we work to "clear the area" of clues to the whereabouts of a lost subject. My hand signals direct Fritz to the left and right. My job is to make sure we cover the area and don't leave "holes." I try to work him into the best conditions depending on wind direction and terrain and, most importantly, to watch him in order to read the messages his body language offers. We move through the search area, Fritz in the lead with me following. After a while, his nose comes up, his tail comes up, and he breaks into a run, zigzagging upwind and disappears into the brush. A minute later he beelines back to me at a dead run and circles me.

"What is it, Fuzz?"

One bark.

"OK, show me. Where is he?"

Off he races again, this time with me running along behind. He comes back to get me several times. Into the brush, up the hill, and behind the spruce tree where a volunteer is hiding.

"You found him! GOOD DOG!" Two quick pats and then, dig into my fanny pack for the ultimate reward--his tennis ball. A few tosses and Fritz is in heaven. He just played his favorite game in the world, and won.

I've been training search and rescue dogs for about five years. Working with animals has always been a favorite pastime of mine, and the combination of learning more about animal

behavior, outdoor recreation, and volunteerism involved in search and rescue work is fully rewarding. My husband and two sons have supported my efforts. In fact, my sons Spencer (age four) and Graham (age one) have been hiding from search dogs (with me or other handlers) since they were six weeks old.

The other members of our family are dogs: Storm, an aging sled dog, and our two search and rescue dogs: Fritz the old man of nine years, and Bella, a three-year-old female. We're associated with P.A.W.S. search dogs of Fairbanks.

P.A.W.S. (an acronym for Personnel Available for Wilderness Search) incorporated as a nonprofit group in 1985. We work closely with Wilderness Search and Rescue (W.S.A.R.), a dedicated group of mantrackers who have been finding people in the Interior for the past 15 years. When our talents are needed, the Alaska State Troopers or the Bureau of Land Management call us to help.

It has long been known that members of the dog family have an extremely well developed sense of smell. Their wild ancestors' lives depended on it. Today, domestic dogs have been trained to locate drugs, chemical pipeline leaks, certain mineral deposits, cadavers, and chemicals used for arson, in addition to lost people.

Many people think of German shepherds as the classic search and rescue dog, but P.A.W.S. dogs come in all shapes and sizes. Our certified search-ready dogs include an Airedale terrier, a Bouvier des Flandres (Belgian herding dog), a golden retriever, labrador retrievers, and a malamute in addition to my shepherds. In training are another Airedale, a bloodhound, a border collie, a giant schnauzer, and more labs and malamutes. We don't care what breed handlers choose; we look for a dog and handler team with a special relationship who can work together as partners. Sound temperament of the dog is essential. These dogs may find children or irrational and/or hypothermic people and must be trusted not to harm or frighten





**Group shot of pups shows most of the different breeds P.A.W.S. handlers use. Missing are a border collie and golden retriever.**

**Bella with two-month-old Graham demonstrates sound temperament is fundamental to a search dog.**



subjects.

Training starts as early as possible, often with seven-week-old puppies. Obedience is first. The most sensitive nose in the world is worthless if it's attached to a dog that is uncontrollable. Early training includes agility work (for safety's sake) and "find it" games where they look for food snacks or favorite toys around the house or wherever. The idea is to associate the words "find it" with using their nose.

Our dogs are trained in tracking and airscent work, and we also spend time training for disaster or collapsed building search, avalanche and water search.

When tracking, a dog follows footprints of a person. The dog works in harness on lead and may also locate articles the person dropped. On a search, you must know where the subject started in order for the dog to track.

In airscent work the dog searches for human scent on the wind. An airscenting dog will clear an area of clues of the subject's whereabouts and doesn't need to know where the person was last seen. The dog works off lead and finds the source of scent, lets the handler know, then leads the handler to the source.

Avalanche, disaster, and water search are all variations of airscent work, and the dog searches for human scent on air currents. In these types of searches the dog usually isn't able to get to the subject. When it discovers where the human scent is arising from snow, rubble or water, the dog is trained to give obvious audible (barking or whining) and/or visible (digging) alerts.

As strange as it sounds, our job as a search team is not to find the missing person. If it was, we would rarely be successful because there are always more searchers and search areas than lost subjects, and it's rare to be assigned the search area which contains the subject. Our job is to search for clues to the whereabouts of the person. We clear areas and let state troopers

know what was found in the area so decisions can be made to determine where to search next.

On the way to a search Fritz leans against me in the truck. "I hope you're ready, buddy, this isn't training."

At the scene, the search operations leader gives W.S.A.R. and P.A.W.S. volunteers information about the missing subject—a four-year-old girl—and assigns search areas. My heart is in my mouth. My own child is close to the same age, and I know what I'd be going through if mine were lost. Just as Fritz, Will (the W.S.A.R. volunteer), and I start into our search area, we find the child coming back home. The search, no matter how short, is successful.

We share many memories of searches. The time Fritz and I wandered through the brush near the airport at -30° looking for a missing and presumed crashed airplane. (The plane was later found in another area, sadly, with no survivors.) The time we snowmachined out to the search area and were trudging along when the radio call came that the missing hunter had wandered out on his own. The water search Fritz and Bella worked from a boat and indicated the location of a drowning victim in the Chena River. The time both dogs and I looked for evidence for the troopers in a homicide case which had taken place eight years earlier. Two teenagers who went out to walk their dog and didn't return but were waiting for searchers to find them. Or the elderly berry picker who was lost overnight but, when found, walked out faster than the rescuers.

Many of the searches we've been on have been gratifying. Some have been sad, and some have been frightening. But training my dogs so they can help people has always been rewarding. If we can ever help keep a family from losing one of its own, it's well worth our time.

*Cathie Harms serves as a Wildlife Biologist with the Division of Wildlife Conservation, ADF&G, Fairbanks.*



The Magazine of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game

# ALASKA'S WILDLIFE

January-February 1991

\$3.00

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