



SNIFFING OUT THE TRUTH

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When it comes to solving wildlife-related crimes, it helps to have a good nose for evidence. None are better than KDWP's K-9 "officers."



Now in its ninth year, the KDWP Law Enforcement Division's K-9 Program has been so successful that as soon as dogs are about to "retire," new ones are brought in for training and replacement. The division budget allots five natural resource officers (NRO, commonly known as game wardens) for K-9 positions, and there are always officers ready for the challenge. It's not easy.

"If there is an open position, you have to have been an NRO I for at least two years and be dedicated, energetic, and in fairly decent shape because it gets pretty physical when you have to run miles behind a dog," explains program supervisor Jason Sawyers. "And you have to love and understand dogs. I like people who have hunted with dogs and trained them because this is kind of the same thing except that we're training them to find guns, spotlights — anything with some scent. It's kind of the same principle."

The current crop of K-9 teams includes Jason Barker, Wichita, and Moose; Jeff Goeckler, Washington, and Lucy; Lance Hockett, Abilene, and Meg; Jake Brooke, Stockton, and Kooper; Ben Womelsdorf, Iola, and Libby; and Sawyers, Topeka, and Rex. Rex is 11 and about to retire. Last year, two dogs were retired: Brian Hanzlick's K9 Alley and Dan Melson's and K9 Chase, after great careers and many cases.

Training is the backbone of the program, and it's ongoing. New dogs and their handlers must undergo an eight-week certification training program. Current handlers and dogs must re-certify their dogs annually, usually during a one-week period in April or May. Certification training is conducted from January through April, so all the dogs aren't out of action for eight weeks in a row. In addition, four hours a week of training is required year-round, depending on the dog

and handler's experience. And all teams meet for three or four days in early fall to refresh skills before hunting seasons. Training exercises and topics for handlers include breed choice, scent, tracking, grooming and health, first aid, wildlife detection, types of alerts, and area searches.

Spring is time for the eight-week certification training, which usually takes place in Indiana. However, Indiana didn't have a course this year,

so the Kansas K-9 Corps developed and conducted its own course near Milford Reservoir from Jan. 23 through April 27. Womelsdorf has a young dog that needed certification, and all the dogs needed annual training. Dogs are commonly about a year old when training begins, and, depending on the dog, may be field-ready by 16 months old. Handlers hope for 10 years of productivity from their dogs.



Above, Jake Brooke, Stockton, and K-9 Kooper pose before tracking exercises near Milford Reservoir last April. Brooke says of his partner, "I really don't go anywhere without him." Opposite page: KDWP's K-9 corps pose after spring training. From left to right: Jake Brooke and Kooper, Jeff Goeckler and Lucy, Jason Sawyers and Rex, Lance Hockett and Meg, Jason Barker and Moose, and Ben Womelsdorf and Libby.



Officer Jeff Goeckler, Washington, uses hand signals to guide Lucy to an area where the author had previously walked to hide an object. Once on the track, it didn't take the dog but a few minutes to locate the object. In a real investigation, this skill could help an officer located evidence such as hidden firearms, ammunition or shell casings.

"Training for tracking takes four to six of the eight weeks," Sawyers explains. "It's the hardest part. It's not only the training of the dogs but the training of the handlers to read their dogs, too. Each dog gives different messages with its tail. Some of them show different body posture — like head or tail low to the ground — when they are tracking. My dog is hard to read, but I've been with him so long, I can tell when he's on track."

Dogs are trained to find an object and scratch the ground next to it. Then the handlers have the dog fetch a toy — usually a bouncing rubber pet toy — to avoid accidents and damage to evidence and to reward the dogs. It's a game for them. In the dog's mind, this is the goal.

The dogs are trained for more than tracking, however.

"On vehicle or building searches, we use choke collars," Sawyers explains. "But the dogs often have snap collars on the job. They're going off-leash on these searches. When they see that collar and hear that snap, that means it's time to go find whatever

they're trained to find. You've also got to be able to give your dog hand signals to control where they search. You've got to work the dog fairly loosely but not miss any ground you have reason to believe might hide what you're looking for."

These aren't bloodhounds, however, which are primarily trailing dogs that are given a scent that they follow. A tracking dog finds a specific scent on the scene and follows that.

"When tracking, our dogs follow a combination of the human scent and the smell of disturbed vegetation where the person they are following has walked," Sawyers explains. "They're both tracking and trailing dogs. They go on the first scent at the scene that we tell them to track.

"The advantage is that if you have an area that is highly disturbed by the person you are tracking — a playground, for example — the person's scent is going to be everywhere, and the dog will get confused. We start at the edge of the playground and work out from there, the dog picking up both the scent of the person and the

scent of the tracks where the person most recently disturbed the ground. We have to have a starting point, however. You can't just give us a shirt and say, 'Go find this person.' We have to know where you think the person was last seen. They can only run a track in a place where a lot of people have run if they have acquired the scent of the person they are tracking first."

When an officer gets a call, they also have to factor in weather. Someone running down black asphalt in July leaves little chance of finding any scent. High humidity and mild temperatures are ideal. Under these conditions, officers can carry an item ½ mile away during training and leave it overnight. The dog usually goes right down the track the next day. It doesn't matter whether something's hidden in tall grass or plain sight. They will find it.

"One time, a guy was shot, and the shooter ran off," says Sawyers. "My dog found the shooter's wallet, so we found out who did it. They're trained to find anything with human scent on it. If you touch it, they will find it. And

it's not just crime. Jeff's dog found a department commissioner's hearing aide. My dog found a Kansas City man's cell phone. Lance's dog found a hunter's wallet containing \$400 last year. So we use it to help people in many ways."

Once on a track, the dog will go wherever the person they're tracking goes, and the handler has to keep up.

How are these dogs able to do this? "It's all from human scent, and every human scent is different," says Barker, who has been with the program since its inception. "Everyone sloughs off skin rafts (flakes) at about 40,000 per minute. Also, their footprints crush vegetation, which leaves scent on the ground. And when people run and are scared, say running from the law, they will pump out even more scent. A dog's nose is 44 times more sensitive than a human's — they can identify individual scents of different people — so this is a big advantage over officers just going out and hunting for people."

Kansas K-9 "officers" have proven to be some of the best in the nation. Brooke and Hockett took four dogs to national certification in Indiana last year, two as backup. Ten days into training, two Virginia dogs had washed out, so Brooke and Hockett gave their two backup dogs to the Virginia department. Both are game warden dogs in Virginia now. Another year, they donated a dog to Indiana that became instrumental in finding a school shooting suspect when other dogs couldn't find the evidence.

"Our dogs excel at what they do," Sawyers adds. "I think it's because we spend a lot more time doing area searches and tracking. Other agencies in the state spend a lot of time on drugs and biting. We like our dogs to have a good temperament."

Which brings us to dog breeds. Labrador retrievers are used exclusively. Hockett and Sawyers explain.



Brooke has a conversation with Kooper during a break in training. New handlers and dogs must undergo an eight-week certification program, and there is annual training, as well.

Sawyers: "When the program started, it was funded entirely through donations, even the dogs. Several sportsmen's groups were involved, and they predominately love Labs. They're intelligent, highly trainable, and generally don't like fighting with other dogs. They have a good temperament, and they already hunt."

Hockett: "We don't go out and buy specially-bred dogs. We usually get them from families who can't care for them."

Sawyers: "We don't look at bloodlines at all. We like dogs from families who don't want them anymore because they're usually hyperactive, and we want that drive. A dog that wants to go, go, go all the time doesn't make a really good house pet. My dog came from the pound. Half our current dogs came from animal shelters. Barker put an article in the Wichita

paper last year, and we received hundreds of calls. We not only want a dog that will do the job, but it has to match the handler's personality, as well. All the dogs we've chosen in the nine years of the program have worked out."

Donations still play a big part in the K-9 program because the agency just doesn't have the budget to cover it all. All of the food is donated by Science Diet throughout each dog's lifetime. A lot of vets provide discounted rates or free service. A lot of medications such as Frontline and Heartgard are donated by the companies.

No natural resource officer's day is routine, but K-9 officers live a different life altogether.

"On a normal day, the dog's always with us when we're working," says Brooke. "That's an adjustment from being a regular field officer. We try to



Lance Hockett follows Meg on a hot tracking trail. Officers must be in good shape to run after eager dogs for sometimes miles at a time. Training a dog to track can take four to six weeks of the eight-week certification program.

train a little each week, especially Lance and I because we've only had our dogs a little over a year. We train and repeat everything more often. When I go home, my dog's always around my family. She stays in the house. I just enjoy getting the calls to take her out and let her work. It's 24/7, like having a kid. I don't really go anywhere without her anymore."

Goeckler jokes that "I spend more time with my dog than I do with my wife. My dog will sit by the door and howl if I leave without her." Barker adds that his dog knows when he's having a bad day.

"They see you put on your uniform, and they're ready to go," says Sawyers. "If you left them at home, they would drive your family crazy."

An afternoon spent watching these men train their dogs convinced me of their dedication, as well as the effectiveness and tractability of the dogs. Much like an elite combat or rescue unit, they are tight-knit and supportive of one another and the mission with which they are charged. Each officer proudly touts their dogs in action. Here's a few stories.

JASON SAWYERS AND K-9 REX

Rex has been doing this for nine years. He has recovered items including guns, spotlights, shell casings, knives, wallets, cell phones, and various game. One of his best was early in his career. We were working at one of the local wetlands, and hunters began to come up to the parking lot. I had Rex start checking hunters' decoy bags to see if anyone was hiding anything. Rex indicated on a decoy bag. When I had them empty the bag, Rex indicated a single decoy. I picked up the decoy, and there were duck breasts hidden inside the decoy. There were many other hunters around, and the word spread everywhere about how the game wardens now have dogs. This simple find served as a deterrent to many. Just the dogs' presence helps us protect the resource.

JAKE BROOKE AND K-9 KOOPER

I was called by regional supervisor Brad Odle, who had lost his smart phone on his way to his tree stand a week earlier. It snowed the day he lost it, but he remembered the path he had walked, so we had a rough idea where to search. He had searched four or five times trying to retrace his steps over the course of the week. Kooper searched for about a half hour and found it in CRP grass, still working.

JEFF GOECKLER AND K-9 LUCY

Lucy helped with the apprehension of individuals who were involved in a high-speed pursuit and then ran from their vehicle into a heavily-wooded area. They had been shooting from their vehicles with the



aid of a spotlight. Lucy was able to track them, which led to their arrest and conviction.

In another case, she found an empty shell casing that led to the arrest and conviction of a man for hunting on private property without permission.

**LANCE HOCKETT
AND
K-9 MEG**

Meg and I helped the Geary County Sheriff's Department with a 69-year-old suicidal female who had fled her residence into the timber with a .357 pistol. Meg tracked the lady to Milford State Park, where she was hiding underneath cedar trees with the pistol. Friends and family members could not give Meg enough hugs. Even the lady we tracked apologized. Meg and I received the Award of Valor.

During the 2011 firearms deer season, Meg and I were called about a landowner who reported hearing several shots on his property and seeing someone walking along the tree line and believed to be carrying a gun. When the individual came to the road, he was not carrying a gun and claimed that he was only out for a walk. Meg and I started an area search in the last known place that the suspect had walked. After a short time, Meg found a .25-06 caliber rifle hidden in the weeds. Confronted with this, the suspect confessed to trespassing and shooting a deer on property where he did not have permission.

**JASON BARKER
AND
K-9 MOOSE**

While patrolling in northern Sumner County during pheasant season, I watched 10 hunters walking

a pasture toward the road. I approached and asked if I could see their hunting licenses. Eight produced valid licenses, but two who were non-residents had no licenses or guns. I found it odd that they would travel from another state just to walk around with eight other hunters, but I told them all that they could walk to their vehicles parked about a mile away. Then I had Moose conduct an area search of the field. Within five minutes, Moose located two shotguns and three shotgun shells. Presented with this evidence, both subjects confessed to hunting with no license.

Another case involved a landowner report that he thought someone was hunting on his land without permission. Upon arrival, I located a truck parked about a ¼ mile from the land in question. I had Moose run a track from the driver's side of the truck. We ended up near the reporting landowner's property and were unable to continue tracking due to high fence. When I arrived back at the suspect's truck, he was there. I asked him where he had been hunting, and he told me on land where his truck was parked, but when

I told him the details of how my canine had tracked him from his truck onto the land where he did not have permission, he confessed.

**BEN WOMELSDORF
AND
K-9 LIBBY**

My dog and I have just been certified (in April), so I have not had the opportunity to make any cases yet. This has been one of the more difficult times of my career but by far the most rewarding. We rescued Libby from the Pottawatomie County Animal Shelter, and I took her home and bonded for two weeks. Four days into training, I realized that I would be the one being trained because she was absorbing the new duties at an amazing pace. My stress level was on sheer overload multiple times, wondering if I had what it took to work with the best. However, when I finally relaxed, it was like a switch had flipped. Libby became a superstar, and I was along for the ride. 🐾



In an area search training exercise, Jason Barker, Wichita, tests Moose's ability to find hidden evidence – in this case fish – under one of several containers arranged in a row. The exercise is designed to immitate what a dog may encounter when walking passed parked cars.

