

Dogs nose in & help stop poachers

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LABRADOR RETRIEVERS, a dream dog for legal hunters, are becoming a nightmare for poachers.

Game wardens are using the breed's natural hunting instincts and strong desire to please their owners to bust people shooting more than their limits of gamebirds and illegally killing deer.

The breed that seems to be the polar opposite of the German shepherds and Doberman pinschers used by some city police departments is also helping Kansas law enforcement catch drug dealers and other criminals.

"It's amazing what these dogs can do for us," said Jason Sawyers, a Topeka-based game warden for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. "They can do in seconds or minutes what could take us hours or days, if we could do it at all." Two- and four-legged wardens hit the fields in 2003 after more than 400 hours of specialized training in Indiana. More recent pairings do the same

amount of training in Kansas. The Labs are taught to find stashed game, such as ducks buried in marsh mud or deer antlers hidden in a vehicle. They're also taught to search for hunting- and fishing-related evidence, such as empty shell casings that could hold fingerprints or a speck of blood that could be matched to a freezer full of deer meat.

Going against their instinct, the dogs aren't allowed to fetch what they discover to their owners. Instead, they're taught to scratch and bark near their find so evidence isn't damaged.

Learning to work together

More than 200 hours is spent teaching the Labs the job of tracking humans under challenging conditions.

The wardens are there to learn, too.

Jason Barker, a Wichita-based game warden, said the training taught how to establish the best relationship with his

Lab, Moose. That included learning ways to help the dog quickly understand the requested task.

"He has a different collar when looking for game or evidence," Barker said during a training session last week. "He wears a harness when he's tracking. As soon as I put something on him, he immediately knows what we're doing."

The long hours of training, plus mandatory weekly practice sessions, also help man and dog bond.

"You have to learn how to read your

THE DOGS AND THEIR WARDENS

Since 2003, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks canine teams have been used in hundreds of cases. Each warden has that one day with their dog that makes them especially proud.

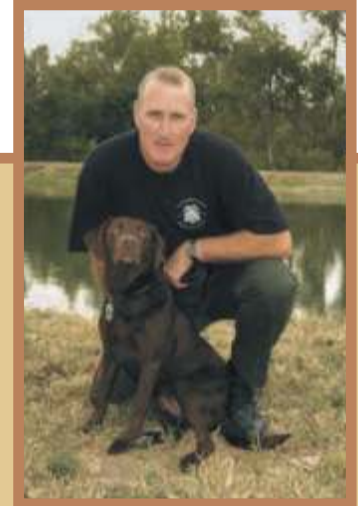


BRIAN HANZLICK AND ALLIE

Hanzlick's female black Lab is perfectly trained for working waterfowl hunters at the Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area. But big-game poaching keeps her working deer cases most of the time. Hanzlick said Allie's best find was three deer that had been shot, and just the heads taken, by out-of-state poachers.

Wardens used photos the men had taken of themselves with the bucks to find the area of the kills. Allie quickly found the exact site. Almost three weeks after the crime, Hanzlick returned to the scene and Allie found a knife that had been dropped by one of the men.

The men were eventually fined about \$36,000.



DAN MELSON AND CHASE

Melson and Chase, a 5 1/2-year-old female chocolate Lab, work wildlife cases and also with the Greenwood County sheriff's office. Melson's most memorable case came after a raid at a house where a meth lab was found. Chase was put on the man's trail about 30 minutes later. Despite heat and heavy cover, the dog followed the fugitive for three-quarters of a mile and led officials to where he was hiding, under a wad of roots in a creek. "I had to hurry up and get her out of there because Chase really just wanted to play with the guy," Melson said. "He wasn't in any mood to play with a dog." The suspect is facing about 10 felony drug and weapons charges.

dog, to tell what's going on," Sawyers said. "Every dog has a different tracking profile and you need to be able to tell if he's actually tracking or not." Most of the wardens keep their Labs in their homes to help strengthen that bond and understanding. The program costs Wildlife and Parks pennies on the dollar compared to what it would cost in man-hours to do what the dogs can do. And much of the money has been donated. Mark Rankin, head of the program, said all of the dogs were donated to the program. Topeka-based Hill's Pet Nutrition Inc. donates the food. Cash donations totaling more than \$15,000 have come from the Kansas City Safari Club and Papa John's Pizza, as well as a number of private citizens.

The wardens agree there couldn't be a better breed for their style of work.

Benefits of the breed

From solid hunting stock, most Labrador retrievers have acute senses of smell and are physically built to withstand a lot of exercise and challenging weather conditions.



A high desire to please their handlers helps make them tireless workers. Their playful nature also drives them toward success. Rather than treats as a reward for a job well done, the Labs simply get a chance to play.

"When Chase finds something, she'll scratch at it, then she's looking for her reward, which is playing with a rolled-up towel," said Dan Melson, a Eureka game warden. "She'll run all around and show it off to people like a kid with a big ol' lollipop. She doesn't get to play with it a lot at home, so it's a really big deal to her." The Lab's gentle temperament is also a plus.

"A lot of police dogs, like German shepherds, can be intimidating, but most people I check (for licenses or game) are happy to see Moose with his wagging tail," Barker said. "People start asking a lot of questions about the dogs and we get to talking. They're a natural bridge to the public."

The Wildlife and Parks dogs are in high demand for demonstrations at schools and civic organizations.

Law enforcement assistance

The Labs have also helped the five wardens develop closer working relationships with other law enforcement agencies.

The same nose that sniffs out a poacher's rifle can find evidence tossed from a car by a murder or robbery suspect. The first job for Sawyers' Lab, Rex, was recovering a wallet and knife buried by a shooting suspect.

The dogs will track a drug dealer on the run as willingly as a trespassing squirrel hunter. This year Melson's dog, Chase, tracked and located a meth dealer fleeing deputies in a rugged and remote area of Greenwood County.

"I help them when we can because they don't have dogs and they're getting better about calling me if they do something and find evidence of wildlife violations," he said. "It's a win-win situation for both of us."

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JASON SAWYERS AND REX

Rescued from a Wichita animal shelter, 6-year-old Rex has helped Sawyers, a Topeka game warden, with many kinds of cases. In one, he tracked a trespasser a mile from his car to where he was illegally hunting. He was escorted from the property and successfully charged with trespassing. Sawyers said his favorite case, though, was the first in which Rex was directly responsible for finding evidence of poaching.

A game warden in another county had seen someone carrying something from a distant field. The man later told the warden he hadn't shot anything. Sawyers and the warden took Rex to an abandoned home surrounded by towering grasses. Within five minutes, Rex was scratching on the sides of an old combine. When Sawyers looked inside, he found two poached turkeys.



"I'm not sure we'd have ever found those in there, but he seemed to go right to them," Sawyers said. The man paid about \$1,800 in fines, had his shotgun confiscated and lost his hunting privileges in Kansas.

BRIAN MARKS AND SHADOW

This is only the second season for the 3 1/2-year-old Lab, but she's already helped the Concordia warden in several cases. Marks said some of his most memorable experiences have been in training sessions.

"We had a duck hunting simulation with a boat behind a vehicle. Shadow walked around the boat, stopped and instantly leaped up and over the side of the boat and went to the decoy bag, where the game was hidden. She smelled it from the ground right away," Marks said. "Things like that really teach you to trust your dog."



JASON BARKER AND MOOSE

Moose is the second dog for the game warden who first proposed the Kansas program. Scout, his first Lab, was killed by a car. In his limited time with Barker, Moose has proven to be worth his daily dog food. This year, Moose was taken to a 40-acre field of 5-foot-tall grass, where a repeat poacher had been seen killing a deer in Harper County. The dog located two spots of deer blood that probably would never have been located by humans, Barker said.

The find helped solidify a witness' story and led to a search warrant that uncovered drugs and illegal weapons at the man's home. The man eventually paid hefty fines, served several months in jail and lost his privileges to hunt in Kansas.