

The Scent Article

(“You Wouldn’t Believe—”)

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When Bloodhound handlers get together, you can count on a lively discussion on scent articles: What works, what doesn’t; what they’ve had to use for lack of anything better on actual searches; and how people who don’t understand scent have contaminated, broadcast, and otherwise messed up scent articles so the dogs couldn’t do a decent job. These stories sometimes start out with something like “You wouldn’t believe what this guy gave me for a scent article “

Terminology may vary. Some handlers call them “scent guides” instead of “scent articles.” Some “scent” their dogs, some “fire” them. But the principle’s the same. They’re talking about the object (if they’re lucky enough to have something as tangible as an object) to cue the dog to the scent of the person he’s supposed to find.

For the past five years, SAR Dog ALERT newsletter has been chronicling lost person searches. Airscenting dogs, tracking dogs, trailing dogs, and dogs using any combination of the above have made an impressive number of finds over that period. And the handlers of trailing dogs have mentioned, in passing, an interesting assortment of scent articles they’ve used.

They’ve also talked about some do’s and

don’ts that are important for every search boss and SAR-responsible deputy who arrives on scene.

Important, too, for handlers of dogs that are trained primarily to airscent.

You never know when you may be called

early enough to try your dog on a fresh trail before you’re assigned to hasty-search down into the canyon or grid-search that ridge on the backside of the lake (see “Search Dog Strategy: What’s the Plan?” Dog Sports, March, 1985). While you and your dog may have done some trail-

ing in practice sessions, you may not have gotten into the art or science of scent articles the way most Bloodhound handlers have.



A Bloodhound handler carries his scent article in a plastic bag as he goes on trail. Photos by Judy Graham

Rules for scent articles

The obvious first rule for scent articles, of whatever type, is that they be uncontaminated: Not touched or breathed on by extraneous people.

Plumas County (CA) SAR Bloodhound handler Jackie Taylor summarizes what she’d like everyone involved in search and rescue to know about scent articles:

“The officers should know how to preserve the evidence, secure things properly so there isn’t a lot of people running around messing things

up. The officers should know what kind of scent articles to get and how to get them, to pick them up with tongs, not with their hands, and to bag the scent articles.... If they've got the scent articles and bagged them, then everything's ready for me to go."

Some handlers prefer to drive to the missing person's home on the way to the search, to collect scent articles and try to make sure they're valid (i.e., worn by the missing person and not touched by anyone else).

There's the story of the deputy who rummages through the missing girl's dresser drawer with both hands, tosses her clothes in a heap on the bed—and then *very carefully* uses a fork to pick out a T-shirt and drop it into a bag for the dog to sniff. ("You wouldn't believe...")

So, what if the only scent article available for little Jenny is the T-shirt that the deputy handled? Some handlers will ask the deputy to present the T-shirt to the dog, reasoning that the dogs are clever enough to figure out it isn't the deputy who's lost, so it must be Jenny.

What kinds of scent articles are best?

A favorite of many handlers seems to be bedding: Sheets, pillowcases, or a nightgown or pajamas the missing person slept in. These are close to the person's skin for an extended period of time and are unlikely to be handled by someone else. Even if little Jenny's mother pulled up the sheets and straightened the blankets, she probably didn't touch the central parts of the bedding. So some handlers will tell their dogs to hop right into Jenny's bed.

At this point, experienced handlers will caution the novice to make sure the missing person was sleeping alone. "If he sleeps with somebody else, you can end up tracking the wrong person without even realizing it," says California handler Maury Tripp, who's been working mantrailing hounds for about 13 years.

(Some basic interviewing skills, then, should be part of the handler's repertory.)

Fairly often the point last seen (PLS) or last known position (LKP) isn't the subject's home

but rather a camp or parked vehicle. In a camp, the missing person's sleeping bag is the next best thing to his bed. With a vehicle, the seat in which he sat may have to do.

The same caution applies to car seats as to beds. On a mock search, one handler discovered her dog was trying to trail the person who — unbeknownst to anyone involved in the exercise—had sat in the driver's seat while he rifled through the contents of the glove compartment, between the time the "missing person" left the vehicle and the time searchers arrived. His scent was more recent than that of the "lost hiker," and he probably was putting out a little more adrenaline, too.

Many handlers like to carry the scent article, or guide, with them on the trail (more about this later.) Obviously an article of clothing is easier to carry than bedding or a car seat, and in many cases clothing is all that's available as a scent article.

Clothing as an article

When it comes to clothing, what one handler swears by may not be another handler's choice at all. As a general rule, garments worn close to the body seem to be best. But when you get to specifics, some dogs seem to have their idiosyncrasies. "I have one dog that just will not track on a sock," confides a southern California Bloodhound handler, "and on upper garments he does very well. Now, my other dog does very well on just about anything I give her."

[Editor's note: Can't say I blame the dog.]

And when all the clothing has been handled by deputies during the initial investigation? A Shepherd handler recalls how he scented his dog in one case:

"The missing subject's clothes were on hangers in the trunk of the car, and deputies had gone through the pockets, looking for identification and clues. Lacking anything better, I used the suit coat lining from the armpit, on the theory that it was less likely to be contaminated and would hold a lot of scent."

Unusual scent sources

What do you use if you arrive on scene, hundreds of miles from the missing person's home, and there's no article of clothing, no tent or sleeping bag, no access to bedding or car seats? Well, there may be car handles or door knobs. There may be footprints. Trailing dog handlers have been known to take scent from these with damp paper towels, or cotton or gauze. Maury Tripp describes one procedure:

"If you have a footprint that's relatively fresh, take a piece of sterile gauze and lay it down on the track for 10 to 15 minutes, and then seal the gauze in a plastic bag. You can also use sterile cotton. Some of the police use cotton on a door handle of a car, if they can't get into the car right away."

A similar technique used by a Shepherd handler is to moisten the gauze and lay the clean plastic bag over it to "incubate" it for a few minutes.

No bedding? No clothes? No footprint? How about a cigarette butt? Or a set of false teeth? These are just a few of the things Bloodhound handlers have used successfully to scent their dogs. In training, the handler can experiment with some of the more off-the-wall scent articles, to see what works and what doesn't, and to prepare their dogs for whatever may be presented on the next search. Joan Johnson of Missouri lists some of the things the handlers in her family have used in training

to scent their hounds: "We give the dogs every situation we can dream up. We've scented on clothing, school textbooks, bandages, cotton balls, tubes of Chapstick, books of matches, beer bottles. We're trying to have a versatile animal."

Maury Tripp adds, "You can use things people have handled, like a screwdriver or a wrench. We've tried styrofoam cups that have been held for 10 or 15 minutes. You can use Coke cans. It's amazing how little scent the dog needs, really."

The cautions of scentwork

How little scent the dog needs!

This should be a caution as well as an encouragement. On more than one search, handlers have discovered their dogs were following not the missing person, but the missing person's scent article, improperly carried through the search area by another dog handler. Jerry Newcomb of the Los Angeles Search Dog Assn. and California Rescue Dog Assn. tells this story:

"When I fired my dog at the campground, he took off north a hundred yards

or so to a bush. He got so turned on that I knew the little girl was under that bush sound asleep. No girl. When I called for an air-scent dog to check around that bush, I was told another handler had put his scent guide on top of the bush while he took a rest. He then went to the road west of there the same way my dog tracked. Looks like my



On a search in the California desert, a Shepherd handler prepares to scent his dog on a footprint (marked with the flag).

dog was tracking his unbagged scent guide.”

And beware of paper bags, which may not stand up well when you’re searching through heavy brush. One trailing dog handler found herself following the scent article carried by a previous team. The article was bagged, alright, but after a night’s searching the bag was full of holes. For this reason, many handlers prefer heavy-gauge plastic bags; ziplock-type bags are ideal. And double bag them.

Some SAR dog units train primarily for airscent work; they expect to be assigned a specific area or route to travel to search and “clear.” Handlers who work primarily in this mode may not want to spend a lot of time experimenting with scent articles and developing the concentration their dogs need for following a track or trail. Still, the more versatile a SAR dog team is, the better it can respond to whatever the situation demands.

The real-world applications are many. You may be lucky enough to arrive on scene four hours after little Jenny went missing, and before the volunteer fire department begins its shoulder-to-shoulder sweep through the woods. What will you use as a scent article?

You may be finishing up your assigned sector when a grid team reports that it’s just found a fresh footprint; the search boss wants a dog team out there right now. Will your dog know what you want when you point to that mark on the ground?

A dog motivated to find people will quickly learn to use whatever scent’s available to him, whether it’s airborne or on the ground. Vary your training to include work with scent articles and trailing from footprints, as well as your generic “find anybody who’s out there.”

And spend some time listening to the Bloodhound handlers when they get to swapping war stories. That way, you won’t discover you’re the bad example of one of those stories that starts out, “You wouldn’t believe what this guy did with the scent article....”