

# The Refind: When You're Blind In the Dark

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It's 0015 hours (or a quarter past midnight to everybody else, asleep in their dark bedrooms), and you're fighting your way through the manzanita by the hazy glow of a headlamp. Somewhere ahead and to the left, you can hear your dog moving. Every few yards, small ravines open under your feet—ankle twisters. You'd give anything for a full moon and a machete.

Suddenly your dog's eyes shine green against your headlamp, staring. What is he trying to say? Has he found the little girl you're looking for, the one who wandered away from home this afternoon? Is he just checking in? Or is he saying he's had enough of this particular exercise? Where has he been and what—if anything—has he found?

This is probably the question that torments off-lead SAR dog handlers more than any other, dark or daylight. Consider the mysteries of a tangled Virginia woods; overgrown deadfall in the southeastern Alaska rainforest; or jumbles of boulders on the Mojave Desert. That missing person could be anywhere out of sight. Your dog has been out of sight. Did he find?

And if he found, and doesn't tell you, this part of the country that you're responsible to search may not be searched again, or maybe not until too late to save that missing kid's life.

Searching is first nature to dogs. Canines that have survived and evolved by sniffing out and giving chase to their prey instinctively cover the woods to find out what's out there. The trick, for the handler, is getting the dog to communicate what he's found. Hence, the refind.

What is it and how do you teach it?

It's different things to different dogs and handlers. For some, it's whip-back-and-stare-you-in-the-face. For others, it's parading back with a stick



*The gleam in this dog's eye is the answer to her handler's question, "Did you find?" SAR dogs develop their own unique language for communicating with their human partners.*

in anticipation of a reward. Some dogs race back and grab their handlers' sleeve; some whirl, buck, and use all the body language at their command. Some dogs are trained to return with a bringsel (a leather hotdog-shaped appendage to their collar) flipped into their mouth. The variations are legion.

And then, in all cases, the refind is leading the handler to the person the dog has just found.

A handler can teach his dog the principle of the refind, but it's generally the dog who comes up with the refinements, the quirks that help make search dog handling ("reading your dog") such a personal and gratifying kind of dog/man communication.

Handlers begin to think about the refind when their dogs have mastered the initial phases of training: when the dog understands the search command and knows that a successful conclusion brings praise/petting/playtime— whatever the dog loves best. And, as the search problems get longer, and more complex, the refind becomes a must.

In the early stages of puppy runaway problems, you, the handler, will be following close behind, ready to join in rewarding as soon as your pup finds his "victim." As the puppy grows and learns the game, he'll soon be out-distancing you. It's up to the victim to reward him until you arrive. Then, one day, the dog finds his victim playing dead, face-down on the ground. No "Good dog," no pats



*This dog whirls around to lead her handler to the person she's just found. Body language is all-important in man-dog communication.*

or tussling or tug-o-war with a stick or a sock. What's wrong? After he tries unsuccessfully to rouse him, there's a good chance your dog will leave the "victim" to race back to you. At this point you ask excitedly, "Did you find? Show me!" Many dogs will whirl around and lead their handlers to the puzzling unresponsive victim. Once the dog has brought you in, of course, the victim comes alive and it's playtime— the best playtime yet, because your dog has made possibly the single biggest step in his search training.

A different method some handlers use is the "go to," where the victim, when found, sends the dog to Go To his handlers. The go to, as well as the bringsel method, should be taught as independent exercises before being incorporated into the search game.

If the dog doesn't come back to you of his own accord, call him back and ask if he found, then give him the Show Me command. If he doesn't seem to grasp that, try another Go Find, and hope he'll go back to refind the original victim.

It goes without saying that, while teaching the refind, you need to know where your victim is. If the dog doesn't promptly catch on to taking you to his find, you may want the victim to signal you when the dog arrives, so you can call the dog back to you. Two-way radios work well; the victim can simply key the mike to indicate a find. Or you can use whistles. But even when you know where the victim is, don't make the mistake of overrunning your dog. Make him lead you in, even if he chooses a circuitous route. Maybe that's the way he got the scent.

The dog will come back to you seven times while all you're trying to do is crawl through this #\*:1:\* !?# manzanita field is a dog you can count on when that little kid's life depends on it.

Later, when your dog has the refind down pat, you'll be searching for someone hidden somewhere out there, say, between the dirt road and that drainage a quarter-mile to the north, and from the lake to that little ridge on the west. Where? It'll be up to your dog to tell you.

Some dogs seem to invent the refind all by themselves. We've seen puppies who, as soon as they graduated from finding their own handlers to

searching for someone else, left the victim of their own accord to race back and tell their partners. But we've also seen dogs whose search training absolutely bogged down at the re-find - or who, having long ago mastered it, suddenly started backsliding. Why?

Maybe the handler hasn't really made searching—and finding—worth the dog's while. Maybe it's a lot more fun, after he finds the victim, to go racing off to find everything else out there in the woods. And so the handler has to try to make it worth his dog's while. Work on a search reward that's more fun than anything the dog could do on his own. Don't forget, that includes the prime reward: your praise and admiration. After all, the dog has just accomplished something that you, with your human senses, couldn't begin to do. Or maybe the dog hasn't come to realize his responsibility. A dog who's accustomed to thinking of his handler as master and leader of the team may not understand how much his handler depends on him. Particularly when the victim isn't completely concealed, some dogs will stand there and stare back at their handlers as if to say, "Well, here he is, and you know it as well as I do." A few search problems with the handler blundering in the dark or stumbling through dense brush will sometimes help these dogs recognize the limitations of the human half of the team.

Sometimes a handler disappearing act will help, especially with a dog who comes part way back with a half-hearted re-find you'd never see in the dark. Duck behind a tree; make the dog search for you, too. He'll start making complete round trips between those two helpless humans—victim and handler—who keep getting lost.

Another trick: play stupid. If your dog isn't telling you, just keep walking. Leave the victim where he lies and tell your dog to keep searching.

Don't try this one until your dog really understands the game; you don't want him to think you're not interested in that person lying out there. It's a good exercise for your experienced dog who sometimes gets bored with too many too-easy searches and starts getting sloppy (you should also set up longer problems without victims to make him appreciate that find.) And, for a more novice dog, it's a way to make rock-solid a re-find that's already pretty good but not quite good enough for the real world.



*Some SAR dog handlers teach their dogs to flip a bringsel into their mouths to indicate they've made a find. The bringsel is a hotdog-shaped leather tag attached to the dog's collar.*