

Water Search: Reading Your Dog To the Depths

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In early March, five years ago, two teenage brothers set out on a canoeing trip on the stormy Occoquan River in northern Virginia. Reportedly excellent swimmers, the boys never returned home. Search efforts by county police, state game wardens and volunteer firemen revealed nothing but the boys' truck parked below Ryans Dam; a field jacket, tennis shoe and paddle; and, above the dam, their swamped canoe.

When Virginia SAR dogs were called in mid-March, a week after the boys' disappearance, the handlers weren't sure how much they could help. Once before their dogs had indicated where a girl had drowned in the pool beneath a waterfall in a swiftwater stream. That was their only experience with detection of bodies completely submerged in water; and that mountain stream was a very different run of water from the Occoquan.

Above Ryans Dam the river makes broad loops between steep banks, from one-tenth to one-third of a mile across and up to 70 feet deep. The bottom is choked with debris, and the water, in March, cold and muddy (the week following the boys' disappearance it had snowed, sleeted, and then a cold rain sent icy water into the already chilled reservoir.) The search area extended for miles along both shores—and all the water in between

For two days the dog teams searched along the shores. Handlers marked on their maps where the dogs showed interest in the water. Plotted on the base map, these alerts formed a cluster extending half a mile upstream from where the canoe was found.

When the boys were still missing two weeks later, dogs and handlers returned to the Occoquan. Again a dog showed interest from shore in the area of the earlier clustered alerts. And this time, a borrowed johnboat gave teams the capability to search

by water as well as land; with the missing boys' father at the helm, one dog team set out to do something none of them had ever trained for; searching by boat for a body underwater.

Instructing the father to run the boat back and forth across the wind, the handler watched his dog who stood as if posed at the bow. In a cove, the dog's nose turned toward one spot on the water as the boat slowly moved by. The handler asked the father to go by that spot again. The dog gave the same reaction.

To double-check, they moved on to the next cove, and the handler tried to replicate what had just happened, including his verbal encouragement to his dog. Nothing. They went back to the original spot. Now the dog grabbed at the water, not drinking but simply biting at it. This was the only place on the reservoir where the dog showed interest. And it was, the handler later learned, just offshore from other alerts.

One week later the father called. "I just want you to know one of my boys came up five yards from where your dog said he was." The other boy's body surfaced nearby three days afterwards.

That was just one case in a growing log¹ of underwater indications by search dogs. Many handlers who were at first skeptical have become believers. But that doesn't mean that water search is easy, or that everything about it has been explained. On the contrary.

Consider the difficulties:

- What command do you use to convey to your dog, while he stands motionless in a boat, that he's to "find" someone? (Few volunteer SAR dog handlers want to spend the time to teach a whole new search mode and command for a mission that's unlikely to yield a live victim. They'd rather put the effort into training to save lives).

- How do you know when your dog has “found,” since he can’t lead you to a body underwater? Many handlers have come to expect less animated alerts on drowned bodies than their dogs give on live persons, so they have to learn to recognize rather subtle body language. The find indication may only be a turning of the dog’s head (and a re-turning every time the boat passes by a particular spot); it may be grabbing at the water to take the odor into the scent receptacles in the dog’s mouth. Some dogs will wade out from shore and swim toward the source of the scent — or leap out of the boat. Once in the water, some will swim circles around the point of greatest scent intensity. But it’s still not like a good, unquestionable above-ground re-find (see DOG SPORTS, October, 1984). (Maybe the dog just likes to swim and it’s a hot day).

- When your dog alerts, how do you determine where the sheriff should put his divers? One dog swam circles around what she considered the best scent in a pond, but she was several yards downwind of where the body surfaced. In a whitewater creek SAR dogs consistently alerted into a pool, but the body was a short distance upstream, caught in rapids. A dog trailed to a slick rock on the bank of a slow-moving stream and alerted into a pool there; other dogs verified the alert, but the body was found a few yards downstream. The dog had apparently trailed to the spot where the missing child fell into the water; were the dogs on air-scent picking up residual odor released from the pool after his body floated downstream?

- Particularly in murky or dangerous water, the closer the dog can pinpoint, the more chance divers will locate the body. But pinpointing can be difficult with all the variables of water depth (and whether the body is on the bottom or partway up), water speed and turbulence, wind speed and direction. And what effect does temperature have? (Dogs have located submerged bodies in mid-July and—frozen solid in ice— in early January).

- When do you reward your dog? When he tells you there’s somebody down there, or later, when you know he was right? Later may be a matter of minutes or hours until divers locate the body, but more commonly it’s days or weeks later when the body surfaces. Even when the dogs have pinpointed

within a few yards, divers have been known to miss. So have other recovery tools. After Virginia SAR dogs alerted in a large lake, the immediate area was dragged without result; the body later surfaced with grappling hook marks across the face.

- How do you train your dog to find a drowned body underwater? Live breathing divers are only an approximation, and it’s so hard to get access to corpses.

Fortunately SAR dogs, if they’re worth their training, are adaptable. If they really like to find people, they’ll find them. In our experience, even dogs with no specific water training have been quite successful at locating bodies underwater.

Nevertheless, training has some advantages. Here are a few:

- Your dog learns a command that cues him to search for someone underwater (or simply “under”).

- You learn to read your dog’s alerts in a no-find situation.

- You can reinforce his alerts in this no-find situation by knowing where the training “victim” is and rewarding him for a proper identification.

- By comparing the location of his alerts with the location of the “victim” underwater, and by thinking about wind and water conditions, you may gain some insight that will help sometime in the future when the sheriff asks, “Where shall I put my divers?”

- Your dog benefits by exposure to yet another facet of search work.

There are definitely advantages—if only for you, psychologically—by training for water search before you find yourself stepping into a johnboat ahead of that skeptical deputy sheriff. In the next installment we’ll talk about techniques for training in water work.

¹ We know of over 20, in California, Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Utah and Virginia. These incidents have occurred at different times of year, in warm as well as very cold water; in still, slow-moving and swift water.