

# Man Trailing: The Misunderstood Canine Resource

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What is a man trailing dog? Is a trailing dog one that is just a sloppy tracking dog? Does the trailing dog need to stay on or near the track? Should the trailing dog be allowed to air scent? How do we test for a discipline that cannot even be defined?

Why would a trailing dog be useful on a search? Is it good to use several trailing dogs in the same scenario? Why do some trailing dogs go the wrong way?

How important is it if the dog carries his head high or low? Is the dog only working when his head is down? Why do some organizations have a combined "tracking/trailing" test if they are different disciplines?

To start, let's compare the man trailing canine to the man tracking human.

Both are looking for clues. While the human uses his eyes, the dog will depend on his nose. Both will of course "see" tracks on the ground and follow them. But as a human should be noticing signs in a variety of locations, so will the dog.

Sometimes a "soft" eye approach is used by humans to see a bigger picture. Sit quietly and focus very intently on one object. Concentrate on this object only, this is known as "hard eyes". Now relax your eyes, let the object be the general center of your gaze but also use your peripheral vision, this is known as "soft eyes".

You cannot effectively find clues without having soft eyes and taking in the whole picture. Neither can the dog.

The job of the human man tracker is to follow and look for visual clues. The job of the trailing dog is to follow and look for scent clues.

If the clue is above the tracks in the form of a torn piece of fabric on a branch, or a broken twig, this is relevant and should not be missed. If the scent from the human is caught in the bush, or rises up the side of a building, it too should not be missed.

Evidence tracking and some competitive tracking such as Schutzhund requires intense focus (hard nose). This is ideal for accuracy but difficult to maintain on aged or lengthy tracks. As the human needs "soft eyes", the trailing dog needs a "soft nose". The trailing dog must smell the scent left by the subject and distributed by the wind along a path, by a stream, in woods, on streets, around buildings or any other number of objects in various terrains. This is commonly done after quite a bit of contamination has occurred and time has passed.

The scent could be high, it could be low. It could be residual or there might be an article or even the subject within the scent pattern (or view for the human). The dog goes to the strongest scent just as the human goes to the most visual object or person.

One advantage of using a trailing dog rather than a tracking dog in search and rescue is that often times missing people tend to loop back on their tracks. Especially when time is of the essence, we would not want to waste time by following a track that might loop, zigzag or spiral. The trailing dog needs to know when to follow the ground track, when to follow the airborne captured scent and when to leave the trail to go to its source.

The goal of the effectively trained trailing dog team is to get from point "A" which is the point last seen (PLS) to point "B" which is the subject and to do this in the most efficient way possible. Faster is better. This is the real world, find the lost person. The trailing dog is specifically trained to leave the track to go to the strongest scent source; this is in fact their primary function.

This differs from the tracking dog which is specifically trained to follow a track. Precision is what is expected and trained for. If we are looking for evidence or are in a competition, we do not want to cut corners or segments off of the track.

It is also different than the air scent dog which is specifically trained to work as a partner with the human to effectively grid or cover a predetermined area and clear that area with a high probability of detection (POD), and to find the subject and communicate this find to the human half of the team. The starting point is arbitrary, the dog is hunting for human scent, and he does not start with scent.

Knowing the different ways dog teams work helps us to realize that whether the trailing dog puts his head up or down is actually only relevant to knowing where the scent might be. It does not mean that he is a tracking dog or an air scenting dog. He is hunting for a particular scent as predators have done for thousands of years.

Trailing dogs find scent on the ground, in the air and on surfaces. This does not mean that he is switching from tracking to air scent to tracking, he is **trailing**.

To know the value of a trailing dog, ask any mother of a missing child; "do you want to see the dog go everywhere your son went or just get to him as fast as possible"?

In many cases the more experienced a trailing dog team is the more likely it is that they will fail conventional tracking or trailing tests that ask him to ignore the scent distribution in favor of tracking precision.

Deploying a properly trained trailing dog should not delay fielding of any other resources. Multiple trailing dogs can even be utilized simultaneously to confirm or rule out other possibilities. Other resources including air scent canines and hasty teams can also be deployed.

Should the trailing dog be the first resource to be deployed? Yes, if they arrive first. Often times it is thought that putting human man trackers out first is best. That is fine; but it is important to know that if both teams find the same trail, the canine will probably pass the man tracker. The canine trailing team is usually fast moving; the man tracking team is more methodical. Both are important but searching for a lost person should not be a man tracker. The canine trailing team is usually fast moving; the man tracking team is more methodical. Both are important but searching for a lost person should not be delayed waiting for a specific resource.

The trained trailing dog can and will discriminate not only between scent types but also between the ages that a scent was left. This is crucial when determining which of several trails a person might have taken and one reason why if several trailing dogs are available that they can start from the same general area and might take the same trail or choose different trails. A trailing dog will not just follow the previous dog, as some may believe. The well-trained dog will follow the scent presented to him.

Another use of a trailing dog, especially if there are several at a search site, is to concurrently use one at the point last seen and others to confirm sightings or clues found at distant locations. To be able to determine that a missing person was not somewhere is very valuable in developing search strategy.

To understand the use of a trailing dog team, it is helpful to understand in part some of the training involved. The team has run several hundred trails in various terrains, vegetation, temperatures, wind (strength and direction), hours of the day and night and ages; and has documented them all. The experienced handler can read what his dog is doing and he knows if the dog scents the subject; the dog will go there by the most direct route possible.

Evaluators, when testing a trailing team must be aware of the effects of terrain, vegetation and wind on scent when planning the test and laying the trail. Tests should be designed so that the dog cannot smell the subject from a distance, he must primarily track. Finally, the evaluators must hope the conditions (weather especially) do not change appreciably until the trail has been run. Additionally, evaluators must also be aware of natural dog behaviors when hunting. Some dogs carry their head high, some low and most do both at various times.

Knowing the training, goals and purpose of each available search and rescue resource is crucial to utilizing their special skills so that others may live.

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