

# Dogs to the Rescue

Dogs help people in many different ways. They are good friends. They love us no matter what. They help us exercise. They make us feel better when we're unhappy.

Some dogs have actual jobs that help people in other ways as well. Following the terrible disaster in New York City, search and rescue dogs have been in the news. Working with their human handlers, these dogs looked for people buried under the rubble.

## The Nose Knows

Of course, they didn't actually 'look'. Unlike people, dogs use their noses not their eyes. Dogs have powerful noses. They have 45 times as many olfactory or smell-sensing cells as people do. One eighth of their brain is concerned with the sense of smell.

According to veterinarian Richard Long writing in the *Edmonton Journal*, "A well-trained human nose could differentiate between old sweat socks and Roquefort cheese. Fido can tell whose sweat socks they were and from what goat's milk the cheese was made."

Trailing and tracking dogs find people who are lost. These are the dogs you see wearing harnesses and long leashes, noses to the ground, pulling their handlers along. Before they start out, tracking dogs are given an article to sniff to get the person's scent. They follow the scent in tiny bits of skin cells left by the person as he or she travels. Amazingly, these dogs can tell the scent of the person they're following from the scent of other people.

Air scent dogs work at disaster sites where people are buried under rubble. They find people by picking up traces of human scent drifting in the air. They work off-leash. They follow the scent to the place where it is strongest then alert their handlers by barking and digging. They can smell people trapped many feet below the surface.

Unlike tracking dogs, air scent dogs can't tell one person from another, so each dog and handler team works its own area. Other people have to leave the area at least fifteen minutes before the dog starts the search. Otherwise, the dog could find another rescue worker by mistake.

Most dogs are trained to be either ground scent or air scent dogs. Some learn to do both.

## It's Not Easy

It's not easy becoming a search and rescue team. Both dog and handler have to work very hard. It takes years of training and experience.

Dog and handler are a team. They work very closely together. The dog has to learn to give an "alert" to tell the handler he's found someone. The handler has to understand what his or her dog is saying.

SAR dogs, as they're called, can be any breed or mixture of breeds and either male or female. What's important is that they want to work and they like people. SAR dogs need a naturally strong drive to hunt down or retrieve prey. Hyper dogs don't work, though, because they have to be able to focus on what they're doing. Size is important. They have to be big enough to do the job but not so big they can't be lifted.

Most are mid-sized dogs in the 70 to 130 kilogram range. Common breeds include German shepherds, border collies, Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers.

### **Working for Love**

Most search and rescue teams are volunteers. These dedicated people and dogs spend long hours training and preparing so they are ready when they're needed. Then they donate more time for the actual rescue operations.

Search and rescue volunteers belong to one of several organizations in Canada. You can learn more about SAR dogs from the Search and Rescue Dog Association of Alberta at [www.sardaa.ca](http://www.sardaa.ca).