

We are all familiar with police dogs fighting crime, but there's a different kind of law enforcement canine—one that makes its career protecting nature and preserving our environment.

It was the day before New York's southern zone big game season when Environmental Conservation Officer (ECO) Jim Volker of Greene County requested a K-9 to respond to a citizen's complaint. The citizen heard a rifle shot earlier that morning and thought that an unscrupulous hunter might have taken a deer prior to the season. ECO Volker knew that it would be difficult to locate evidence, and so was depending on a K-9's keen sense of smell to locate any deer that may be hidden.

When K-9 handler Keith Isles and his K-9 "Blitz" arrived on the scene, they were ready to work. Taking advantage of ECO Volker's knowledge of his patrol area, the ECOs traveled to surrounding camps. At one, they found several vehicles, and ten men eating breakfast. While Jim engaged the men in general conversation, Blitz and his handler went to work with his venison detection skills. Blitz immediately showed interest in an ATV, which had fresh deer hair and blood on the back rack, but quickly moved off to a nearby shed. He put his nose to work at the corners of the doors, stopped, cleared his nostrils, and gave his unmistakable alert by scratching at the locked door. No doubt there was a deer inside. Isles radioed ECO Volker and informed him of the find.

Knowing they were caught, the camp owners gave consent for the ECOs to search the shed. Inside was not one, but three white-tailed deer illegally taken prior to the season.



Land's BEST FRIEND

By Keith Isles

Scenes like this aren't new to DEC's Division of Law Enforcement's (DLE) K-9 Unit, which has 30 years of experience detecting evidence, tracking people and apprehending violators.

It all started in 1977, when ECO Richard "Dick" Matzell, of Colton, St. Lawrence County, recognized the need for a tool that could assist ECOs in locating wildlife evidence possibly taken illegally and hidden by poachers in camps, cars and barns. Dick had a long interest in sled-dog racing and dogs in general, and knew the world's police agencies had long used dogs to find evidence, such as drugs and explosives. It occurred to him that using a process similar to police dog training, a dog could be trained to find venison and other wildlife. Dick approached then director of Division of Law Enforcement Robert VanBenschoten with this idea. The director recognized the opportunity and gave Dick approval to begin training the first K-9.

At the time, the New York State Police were in the process of expanding their relatively new K-9 Unit, and were planning their first K-9 Handler Basic School. After a few discussions, ECO Matzell was accepted into the school to begin training with his new K-9 partner, Paws. In 1978, ECO Matzell and Paws graduated as a certified K-9 team, and Paws became the nation's first certified venison-detection dog. And so DLE's K-9 Unit was born.

Today's K-9 Unit is comprised of eight German shepherds trained in a variety of disciplines, ready and able to assist ECOs and other agencies in their investigations. The K-9s use their superior scent detection abilities to locate evidence of violations, such as spent shell casings, firearms, and wildlife. They are also trained to track human scent.

K-9 handlers are selected based on the DEC's need. When a K-9 team would be an asset to a region, a handler is selected

from a long list of applicants. The potential handler must have an impeccable service record with the division, must be self-motivated, and willing to persevere when tasks become difficult. The ECO's home and family environment are also heavily considered because of the impact they will have on the dog.

K-9s selected for duty are German shepherds because of their sociability,

loyalty, ability to work in adverse environments, and ability to be trained to perform a variety of tasks. The K-9s are required to live with their handlers, where they grow accustomed to everyday stresses, helping them remain social and obedient. It also helps the handlers and the K-9s form strong bonds, which is important considering K-9s are also trained to protect their handlers.



German shepherds like Paws (shown here in 1979) are chosen for law enforcement because of their extreme loyalty, dedication and perseverance.



Many criteria must be met in order for an ECO to become a handler, or a dog to become a venison-detection canine. Paws and ECO Matzell (shown here in 1979) became DEC's first certified K-9 Unit after meeting such criteria and undergoing extensive training.



DEC's K-9 Unit dogs are friendly, confident and, just like their ECO partner, act professionally in public. Though powerful, they are always under their handler's complete control.

In addition to the breed, there are several other attributes a dog must possess to be suitable for law enforcement detail. The dogs must behave well around people, be confident, friendly, and ready to adjust to varying conditions. The dogs must also be healthy and in athletic condition; hips and elbows are often X-rayed to rule out hip dysplasia and arthritis. Most importantly, the ideal dogs have an extreme "ball drive." The dog that lives to play with a ball is a dog that can be easily trained to perform police dog tasks. The chosen K-9 and handler attend a 16-week training school where they learn under the direction of a DLE K-9 instructor to become a certified K-9 team.

During the first phase of training, the K-9s achieve a high level of obedience. They learn to respond to both verbal and hand commands, walk at their handler's heel, and sit, stay and return to the handler when directed. And just like an ECO, the K-9 must act professionally in public.

K-9s selected for duty are German shepherds because of their sociability, loyalty and ability to work in adverse environments.

Because they are considered "trained locating tools," K-9s are also taught to locate evidence. Their superior sense of smell allows them to locate people and evidence otherwise difficult or impossible to find. Additionally, the dogs are trained to find spent shell casings from firearms left behind at shooting incidents by locating the odor of burned gun powder. This ability has been particularly helpful investigating Hunter-Related Shooting Incidents (HRSIs).

The Division of Law Enforcement conducts detailed investigations of HRSIs. In the confusion that exists between shooter and victim, it is often difficult to locate the exact point of firearm discharge. Using their detection ability, K-9s quickly and

efficiently locate spent shell casings, evidence helpful in reconstructing shooting incidents. K-9s are also able to locate the wadding from shotgun shells, which shows the direction of aim. Additionally, they can locate firearms that have been discarded by violators in an attempt to avoid prosecution. Obviously, finding the firearm used in a crime is important for the case investigator, but it also is important to protect public safety.

DEC's K-9s are also trained to track human scent. Whether that scent is from a lost two-year-old child or a 40-year-old poacher fleeing the scene of a crime is of no significance to the K-9. The dog is trained to follow the freshest scent and, if he performs well

and the conditions are correct, the person is located and the K-9 receives a reward. Most of the time that reward is no more than to play with a ball, or receive praise from his handler. While tracking, the dogs often locate important evidence left behind by the violator or lost person. This can save valuable time by directing the responders to areas that should be searched.

The K-9s' tracking ability can also be used as an investigatory tool. For example, K-9s can track scent from an abandoned vehicle, which may lead to evidence of ECL violations such as illegal baiting of game, or harvesting ginseng out of season.

Historically, all the K-9s were trained to detect venison and to apprehend game violators who had taken white-tailed deer in some illegal manner. As the program evolved however, a few K-9s were trained to locate specific species, such as song-birds and fisher. DEC K-9s are now trained to detect black bear, trout, wild turkey, black bass and, of course, venison. This provides a more year-round use of K-9s, and more assistance to ECOs as they perform their duties.

While on duty, DEC's K-9s are trained to protect their handler and any other persons from harm.

Quite often, an officer in the field merely has to say to a suspected violator that a DEC K-9 is on its way and the person usually just confesses and provides the location of the evidence.

The duties of an Environmental Conservation Officer can be dangerous. ECOs work alone in remote areas, usually dealing with people who possess firearms and/or other weapons. Alcohol is frequently a factor in the most serious violations, which can occur late at night. ECOs also participate in fugitive searches, assisting fellow ECOs and other agencies in the apprehension of criminals. For these reasons, DEC's K-9s are trained (like other Police K-9s) to protect their handler and other persons from harm while on patrol. The K-9s protect their handlers both with and without command, as the situation dictates.

After K-9 selection and training, the result is a unique law enforcement tool. Never fully understanding how important their actions are, these dedicated "employees" work solely for their handler's praise.

James Clayton



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Paws retired in 1988 after serving as a pioneer in the field of conservation law enforcement, and has long since passed away. ECO Dick Matzell is also retired, but remains proud of the accomplishments of the K-9 Unit he started all those years ago. As DEC's K-9 unit enters its fourth decade, the K-9s and their handlers continue to maintain the proud tradition of the Division of Law Enforcement's commitment to resource and environmental protection.

And about those three illegal deer found in Greene County? Five poachers were arrested and charged with taking a white-tailed deer illegally and for other offenses.

However, Blitz's day was not done. Soon after that case was closed, Blitz and Isles were called to Delaware County on another request. With Blitz's nose, they tracked a poacher through the woods to his camp and located two other deer taken illegally. It was just another day at the office for one of DEC's committed K-9 crew.

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James Clayton



Did You Know?

The term "K-9" was first coined during the 1940s and 50s in the US Army's War Dog Program. The program trained dogs to help soldiers in combat and was often referred to as "Canine Corps." Due to its phonetic association, the program became informally known as "K-9 Corps" and thus the dogs became "K-9s." Following World War II, the partnership of war dogs and their handlers became a good addition to law enforcement, and the term K-9 continued to spread.