

SNIFFING AROUND

FWP investigates the benefits of using K9 companions to assist with game law enforcement.

By Michael Wright. Photos by Erik Petersen



UNDER INVESTIGATION Increasingly across the United States, state and federal conservation agencies are using dogs to help in law enforcement. K9 companions can find hidden evidence (such as spent shell casings), track humans, and detect hidden game carcasses in vehicles. Here FWP warden sergeant Coy Kline works with his three-year-old German shepherd, Kikka.

On a recent evening at Missouri Headwaters State Park, Paul Luepke leashed his four-year-old Dutch shepherd, Oola, and walked with her to the front of his pickup. Oola, a fountain of energy, knew what was coming. Luepke stopped, unhooked the leash, and gave the command.

“Search!”

Off Oola went, running and sniffing for the smell of freshly burned gunpowder, gun oil, and human scent in the tall grass of a pasture. Luepke, a Columbus-based game warden for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, had hidden a pistol in the dense vegetation. It took his K9 partner all of two minutes to find it. Oola lay down, her tongue out, in front of the firearm and looked at Luepke, both obedient and eager. She knew she’d now get her toy—a foot-long piece of sandblasting hose covered in bite marks.

“These dogs work for rewards,” Luepke says, tossing the hose to Oola. “For some reason, she loves this thing.”

The man-dog team practices this drill regularly. Oola must stay sharp. She too works for FWP, traveling everywhere with her

human companion and sniffing out evidence to help Luepke bring lawbreakers to justice. Butte warden sergeant Coy Kline and Kikka, his three-year-old German shepherd, are the other K9 team in the FWP Enforcement Division. (Police and other law enforcement officers use “K9” as an abbreviation.)

The two teams are part of a pilot project to determine whether FWP should invest further in a canine program. Dave Loewen, FWP’s law enforcement chief, says the test run will last at least two years. “Then we’ll assess the dog teams’ effectiveness and how much they cost,” he says. “A big issue is whether the extra time it takes to train and maintain enforcement dogs is worth the time it takes away from other duties.”

If FWP concludes that benefits outweigh costs, the department may request funding through the Montana Legislature for a permanent K9 program, Loewen says.

So far, the enforcement chief is encouraged by what he has seen. “The dogs definitely seem to be an asset for game law enforcement in Montana. The handlers and a lot of other wardens are excited about the potential of having more canine assistance in the future,” Loewen says.

COMMON PRACTICE

Wardens in Idaho, North Dakota, Alberta, and British Columbia have been using dogs, in some cases for years, as have law enforcement staff with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. FWP wardens had not experimented with dogs until about a decade ago, when Luepke started training his pet German shepherd, Axel. Luepke, who has worked for FWP for 13 years, says he started testing the dog’s skills to see if he could be a working law enforcement animal. When it became clear that Axel had an aptitude for it, Luepke started bringing his dog to work. “Right away he was helping out,” Luepke says.

Axel found shell casings, a hunter’s headlamp, and a fellow warden’s phone. The dog also found a hat with the owner’s name written inside, evidence Luepke used to arrest a trespasser. In 2015, Axel died unexpectedly at age seven, while still in his prime. Luepke bought Oola and began training the Dutch shepherd, a breed similar to German shepherds and known for its trainability and intense drive and focus.

Kline brought Kikka into the enforcement business a few years ago. Kline has been with FWP for three decades, mostly as a game warden. Working with dogs was a twist he didn’t see coming. “It never really entered my mind,” Kline says.

He bought Kikka as a puppy, a Christmas present for his son. After learning of Luepke’s success with Axel, Kline started training Kikka to find hidden objects, beginning with a dog biscuit under a box. Soon she was finding shell casings hidden in the house, and then in the field. Kikka helped FWP arrest three poachers in 2018 when she located the snow-covered shell casing of a unique caliber near Yellowstone National Park.

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TEST PILOTS Columbus-based FWP game warden Paul Luepke with Oola, and Butte-based warden sergeant Coy Kline with Kikka, are part of a pilot project to see if enforcement dogs are a good investment for FWP.



CONTINUING EDUCATION Enforcement dogs must be regularly trained to learn new skills and hone existing ones. Clockwise from top: Kline unloads an eager Kikka for a training session; as a reward for finding a hidden pistol, Oola gets to play with her toy; back in the truck, she gets an ear scratch.

SNIFF OUT FISH

In addition to finding evidence, both dogs are certified to track humans and detect wildlife. Luepke says that when given a piece of clothing such as a hat or glove, the dogs can find someone hiding in dense forest or vast prairie. Dogs certified in wildlife detection can “sniff out fish or elk meat in a cooler, or a gut pile out in the hills somewhere,”

Kline says. The enforcement dogs help search-and-rescue missions by locating lost or injured hikers or hunters.

Luepke says he’s heard from K9 handlers in other states that their dogs help de-escalate tense situations in which wardens must confront hunters—who are usually armed. “It seems that people tend to calm down when a dog is around,” Luepke says.

To ensure the dogs are always ready for action, Kline and Luepke regularly run their four-legged partners through drills, such as sniffing out fish and game meat, finding hidden objects, and tracking people. Basic obedience is reinforced daily.

“We try to practice one skill every day,” Kline says. “It keeps the dogs sharp—and it keeps us sharp, too.” 🐾