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

By Michael Wright. Photos by Erik Petersen
O

a recent evening at Mis-
souri Headwaters State Park, Paul Luepke leashed his four-year-old Dutch shep-
herd, Oola, and walked with
her to the front of his pickup. Oola, a foun-
tain 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,
says, tossing the hose to Oola. “For some
blasting hose covered in bite marks.

Now get her toy—a foot-long piece of sand-

ularly. Oola must stay sharp. She too works
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 encour-
aged by what he has seen. “The dogs defi-
nitely 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.

The man-dog team practices this drill reg-
ularly. 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 fur-
ther 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 encour-
aged by what he has seen. “The dogs defi-
nitely 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.

The two teams are part of a pilot project to
determine whether FWP should invest fur-
ther 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 encour-
aged by what he has seen. “The dogs defi-
nitely 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.

A K9 handler’s job is demanding and
arduous. “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our-legged partners through drills, such as
sniffing out fish and game meat, finding hid-
den objects, and tracking people. Basic obe-
dience is reinforced daily.

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

Michael Wright is city editor for
the Bozeman Daily Chronicle.
Erik Petersen is a freelance
photographer and videographer
in Clyde Park.


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.

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 detec-
tion 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 bikers or hunters.

Luepke says he’s heard from K9 handlers in
other states that their dogs help de-esca-
tate 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.

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.

COMMON PRACTICE

Wardens in Idaho, North Dakota, Alberta, and British Columbia have been using dogs, in some cases for years, as have law enforce-
ment 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 apti-
tude for it, Luepke started bringing his dog
to work. “Right away he was helping out,”
Luepke says.

Axel found shell casings, a hunter’s head-
lamp, 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 unex-
pectedly at age seven, while still in his
prime. Luepke bought Oola and began train-
ing the Dutch shepherd, a breed similar to
German shepherds and known for its train-
bility and intense drive and focus.

Kline brought Kikka into the enforce-
ment business a few years ago. Kline has
been with FWP for three decades, mostly as a game war-
den. 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 suc-
cess 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 poach-
 ers in 2018 when she located the
snow-covered shell casing of a
unique caliber near Yellowstone
National Park.

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

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 bikers 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.”

Michael Wright is city editor for the Bozeman Daily Chronicle.
Erik Petersen is a freelance photographer and videographer in Clyde Park.