

Kenai Refuge introduces newest employee

by Rob Barto

After two years of planning, the Kenai NWR entered a new era of Law Enforcement by purchasing and training a Wildlife canine unit to be stationed in Soldotna but be available for details throughout the state. In October of 2004, I was detailed to Northern California where I met my new partner, Sampson. Sampson is a 2 year old Black Lab that had originally been selected for becoming a Canine Companion for those folks who are wheelchair bound. However, during the training it was discovered that Sampson was too energetic to properly perform his duties. In other words, he could not control his excitement to do the job at hand. This behavior may have prevented Sampson from becoming a Canine Companion, but it is exactly the type of behavior that is desired in a police canine. Training began with a simple game of fetch with tennis balls. Now, he trained to perform evidence recovery, wildlife detection, and tracking. When Sampson switches gears between tasks he wears a different collar and I use different commands. All tasks except tracking are done off leash with verbal commands keeping him focused on the area of the search.

To become certified in evidence recovery, Sampson must be able to locate three items in a 100 foot square covered with vegetation that is no less than 10 inches high in less than five minutes. The hidden items can be anything with human scent such as credit cards, knives, guns, tools, saws, wallets, etc. Once locating the item, Sampson is trained to lie with the item between his front paws. If the vegetation is especially thick Sampson is given a command to root out the item with his nose.

Certification in wildlife detection is similar to that of a narcotics canine. Prior to receiving our certification we must search and successfully find two separate wildlife samples (meat cooked or uncooked, hair, bloody clothes or gloves) in four different environments. Unlike evidence recovery, Sampson's indication for wildlife is to sit at the point the scent is the strongest and then it is up to me to locate the exact location of the sample. Building searches are done by placing wildlife samples in a residence. The samples can be hidden behind stoves, in washer/dryers, furnace vents, shelves, drain pipes, dressers, in short

wherever the certifying trainer wants to hide them. Prior to starting the search I put a green nylon collar on Sampson, give the search command and enter the residence where we search room by room until all articles are located and identified. There is no time limit on wildlife searches. Vehicle searches are very similar to building searches except we use a row of at least 7 cars and only two of them will have one sample hidden. It is Sampson's job to not only locate the car but pinpoint the location of the sample whether it's on the frame by the muffler or in a lunch box behind the driver's seat. Area searches are similar to evidence recovery. However, this time samples can be up in trees or buried under stumps, leaves, rocks, etc. There can be a time limit on this exercise depending on the size of the area, that last certification that we completed the trainer set two samples out in an area approximately 200 yards square and buried one of the samples in approximately three inches of dirt. The final wildlife search that we receive certification in is luggage searches. A cardboard box is used to simulate luggage and the test consists of at five boxes with only one of the boxes containing a sample. Additionally, during wildlife searches, the trainer can place domestic meat samples such as chicken, pork, or beef and Sampson is supposed to pass over the items and indicate solely on wildlife items.

Currently we are certified for detecting Moose, Brown and Black Bear, Caribou, Dall sheep, Mountain Goat, and Deer. I plan to add Polar Bear and Musk Ox to our plate this winter.

Probably the toughest certification that we receive is tracking or trailing of subjects who either lost in the woods or for whatever reason has decided to elude the police by running. Trailing certification is similar but is divided into three separate classifications. The novice trailer will trail a 10 minute old trail for one half mile over a vegetative surface with no other human trails present. The expert will use a trail 1 hour old covering one mile, start and end on vegetation but have 500 feet of the trail be on pavement. Finally the distinguished expert will start on a trail one hour old, cover 1 and ½ mile, run at least 500 feet on pavement, cross a stream, and have two fresh humans' trails crossing the

trail. A subject will remain at the end of all the trails.

His reward for all this work and training—a tennis ball.

As you can see having a canine partner is a lot of work and training, but there is no better experience

when Sampson finds the guy who ran or locates a crucial piece of evidence.

Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.