

What Does It Take To Be a Search and Rescue Dog?

Search and rescue dogs save lives during natural disasters, assist in finding people lost in the woods, and are trained to keep searching even in extreme climates and conditions. It's not the breed that makes the best search and rescue dogs but rather these sought-after traits.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many dogs can be trained to do search-and-rescue activities, however they're most often sporting, hunting or herding dogs
- Search and rescue dogs must have strong prey drives, excellent scenting capability, physical stamina and a high degree of intelligence and trainability
- Search and rescue dogs can be trained to detect a person's scent in the air, follow a trail on the ground, find people trapped in collapsed buildings and much more

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Dogs are amazing creatures that give the priceless gift of love, affection and companionship to their owners. Some dogs, however, give back even more by providing invaluable search and rescue services to those in need.

Law enforcement agencies, fire departments and rescue organizations depend on such dogs to locate missing people. After specialized training, these dogs can locate a child lost in the wilderness or missing from their home.

They may also find an Alzheimer's patient who has disappeared or rescue a skier trapped in an avalanche.

Search and rescue dogs are also used to find people trapped in collapsed buildings following an earthquake or other disaster, and they can even help locate drowning victims.¹

What Types of Dogs Make the Best Search and Rescue Dogs?

Many dogs can be trained to do search-and-rescue activities, however they're most often sporting, hunting or herding dogs, including:

- Bloodhound
- Labrador retriever
- Newfoundland
- German shepherd
- **Golden retriever**

- Belgian Malinois

These dog breeds not only have superior abilities to hear and track scents, but they also display impressive strength, endurance and mental stability. Inside your dog's nose there are up to 300 million olfactory receptors (compared to about 6 million in humans).

While you can detect certain odors in parts per billion, a dog can detect them in parts per trillion. Plus, the part of a dog's brain devoted to analyzing smells is about 40 times larger, proportionally, than the same such area in your brain.²

This explains why dogs' sense of smell is anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 times more acute than your own, and also why their sense of smell can be used to save lives. It's important to note, however, that dogs of many breeds can potentially be search and rescue dogs.

The American Rescue Dog Association (ARDA) pointed out that the following traits are essential:³

- Excellent scenting capability
- Strong drives (prey, pack, play, etc.)
- Physical endurance/stamina
- High degree of intelligence
- High degree of trainability

ARDA, which modified its standards in 2007 to allow individuals with any breed of dog to become members, explained:⁴

"... [B]reed alone does not produce an ARDA quality search dog. A stable, friendly temperament and strong drives are essential and can only be achieved through good breeding programs, frequent socialization with other humans and dogs, and a strong training foundation."

Different Types of Search and Rescue Dogs

To become a certified search and rescue dog, dogs and their handlers must train extensively, sometimes for years. Further, because different rescue situations call for different skills, dogs may be trained in multiple rescue modalities, including:⁵

- **Air scenting** — Dogs are trained to pick up human scent that is being carried in the air. They will also focus on the "cone" of scent where the smell is most concentrated. Air-scenting dogs are often used to search for lost people over large areas of land.
- **Trailing** — A trailing dog follows the "trail" of particles (such as skin cells or tissues) left behind by a person as they travel. These particles are typically found close to the ground, so a trailing dog will search with his nose to the ground.

Trailing dogs (often bloodhounds) can typically discriminate between different scents, so may be given an article of the person's clothing to sniff, then taken to the place they were last seen and allowed to follow their trail.

- **Tracking** — A tracking dog is similar to a trailing dog in that it can track a person's path. However, tracking dogs may be used to follow a person's trail even when there is no scent article available (such as in the case of a criminal on the run).

Other search and rescue dogs may be specially trained to detect cadavers or bodies in the water or to search for human scent that is buried in or under snow (avalanche dog).

Other dogs specialize in searching scenes of disaster (tornadoes, earthquakes, explosions, etc.) and are trained to find human scents in collapsed structures. These dogs are able to work even in confined spaces and on unstable surfaces.

Search and Rescue Teams Pass Rigorous Training Tests

Search and rescue dogs and their handlers work together extensively to become certified. Urban Search-and-Rescue Task Forces with The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), for instance, must pass a national certification test in urban search and rescue and be re-certified every three years.

Handlers must be at least 18 years old and dogs typically are 2 years or older. According to FEMA:⁶

"For the handler, certification includes tests regarding search strategies and tactics, mapping, search and victim markings, briefing and debriefing skills, in addition to canine handling skills.

For the disaster search canine, certification includes proper command control, agility skills, a focused bark alert to indicate a live find, and a willingness to persist to search for live victims in spite of possible extreme temperatures and animal, food and noise distractions.

The canine must also be confident enough to search independently and must be able to negotiate slippery surfaces, balance wobbly objects underneath his feet and go through dark tunnels.

The team tests on two large rubble piles for an unknown number of victims, implementing all of their knowledge, skills and abilities acquired from years of training. Teams that pass are some of the most highly trained canine resources in the country."

Innovative Program Teams Veterans With Rescue Dogs

Returning and retired soldiers are uniquely suited to serve as handlers to canines in search and rescue missions. As noted by Search and Rescue Dogs of the United States (SARDUS), there is a great need for search and rescue dog teams in the U.S. They pointed out that in most cases when children go missing, search and rescue dogs are not used to help find them.

SARDUS has organized the Returning Soldier Initiative, which provides training and search dogs to returning military members who would like to volunteer to serve their communities as search dog handlers.

Both search and rescue dogs and their handlers deserve our utmost respect and care. If you come across such a team in your community, please take a moment to give them your thanks. Fortunately, search and rescue dogs are being recognized more on a national level as well.

In September 2015, for instance, the last known living rescue dog — named Bretagne — that served during the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attack was honored in New York City. You can watch her celebration below.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

¹ [Search and Rescue Dogs of the United States](#)

² [PBS.org NOVA October 4, 2012](#)

^{3,4} [American Rescue Dog Association, ARDA Search Dogs](#)

⁵ [U.S. Search and Rescue Task Force](#)

⁶ [FEMA.gov Urban Search & Rescue](#)
