



Search & Rescue Volunteers and their Dogs Presented by June Felstead, with her Blue Marl Collie, Mollie.

Fri 12th Feb 2016

This meeting was a great start to the year, with a hall full of dog loving members and visitors eagerly waiting to see Mollie and her owner, June, talk about lowland search and rescue.

We normally associate search and rescue with teams in the mountainous areas of the country going out to locate people who have become lost or missing for a variety of reasons. However, there are nine search and rescue dog teams in the lowland areas of the UK, available 24/7 when called upon by the Police. June is part of Search Dogs Sussex (<http://searchdogssussex.com>), which is a member of the Association of Lowland Search and Rescue Teams (<http://www.alsar.org.uk>). At the time of her talk there was in fact a search going on in Dorset.

The charity was formed in 2003, following the Sarah Palin case, to help locate missing people, “mispers” as they are known, with the use of air sniffing dogs. A surprisingly large number of mispers occur nationally during the course of a year, the figure was about 300,000 for 2011/2, of whom 34% were female and 66% male. Of them, about 46% were classified as despondents, 22% as suffering from dementia and another 5% as suffering mental ill-health. Statistics gathered about mispers have been compiled into a lost person behaviour book, which helps determine the best way to look for someone. Only serious cases require the support of a dog search team and on average the Sussex team have about two callouts per month.

The analysis begins with a search wheel, with the hub representing that person’s last known whereabouts. The rim represents the area of search and the spokes represent likely routes travelled, subject to geography. Reflectors on the wheel highlight points of significance. A missing dementia patient will typically travel in a straight line, whereas a despondent will head for places out of sight.

The pattern of search will vary according to the wind and terrain. A person will emit about 40,000 particles per minute and knowing how they travel subsequently affects the positioning of the dog and its search path in order to maximise the chances of picking up a scent. A dog has typically got 200 million scent receptors in its nose, forty times that of an average human, which underlines the contribution they can make.

Remembering that everyone in a team is a volunteer, not only spending their time but also covering the cost of out of pocket expenses too, they train four times a month during the day and also at night. A dog needs to learn how to function under a wide a set of circumstances as possible since the time to find someone in a real rescue has an impact on the survivability of that person. If a crime scene is found then the team has been trained to preserve it for later forensic analysis.

Collies, spaniels, terriers and German shepherd dogs are the most common breeds used in search and rescue. Essential characteristics include a strong play drive, a good nose, safe with livestock, stamina, safe with other dogs and people, and obedience. As they near the end of their initial training they go for two mock assessments (each valid for 3 months) before going for a national test.

Only when all have been passed can they then be used in a real rescue. Regular practice sessions keep their training up to date.

During the talk and slides, Mollie and another search and rescue dog, Lilly, belonging to a colleague Paul, were sitting or lying patiently on the hall floor. With only a couple of fidgets and getting up occasionally to stretch, their patience was rewarded with a "Valentines" dog biscuit treat. The slides showed current search strategies, some facts and figures, and photos of the dogs and their owners in various situations and environments. One of the more memorable of which was Lilly having just rolled in a very muddy ditch. All that could be seen was a pair of eyes peering out of a blob of light brown mud that resembled the shape of a dog!

Leycester Whewell, EHADPS secretary, 17Feb2016