

Tracking Horses



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My relationship with dogs has been lifelong. Some of my relationships have been professional, from hunting dogs, to K9s with law enforcement, and to scent tracking dogs with search and rescue. I firmly believe that dogs truly are without sin and have a perfect soul.

The best relationships for me are with the family dogs, that have been Jack Russel terrorist for the past 25 years. They are the smartest dogs I have ever been around, and also the most insane at times. Always entertaining and loyal, they can occasionally test a person's patience and tolerance.

The other side of Jacks would be their scent tracking ability. These dogs can scent a game animal from great distance and get on a track and stay there until the game is found. That is why they make great cadaver dogs, often helping in backcountry recoveries. I don't use our dogs for that, again, keeping the relationship on a personal



Horses and the outdoors go hand-in-hand. It makes perfect sense to use horses as a tracking animal. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

level.

I will relate one experience with tracking dogs for your consideration. The posse was searching for a lost hunter, missing for almost 2 weeks, so it was clear the search was now a recovery. The dogs were released on the trail that started by the hunter's truck. These 2 tracking dogs ran up the slope and worked their way along a saddle, moving to the edge to see down the valley below, just as a hunter would do. It was clear they were following the track of the missing hunter.

The dogs followed the trail several miles until lighting up on a tree with a great deal of underbrush around the base. Deep inside, leaning against the tree was the body of the missing hunter. The man had sought refuge

from a thunderstorm under the tree. Bad idea. Lightning then struck the tree, thereby punching the man's ticket on the last train west.

Searchers had circled the tree on top of that ridge several times during the preceding days but never found the man because he was so well hidden in the thick brush. The dogs performed remarkably, even on a cold trail.

Dogs have long been associated with an ability to use their nose far better than human beings. Another animal you might not have considered as a tracking animal with a superior sense of smell and taste, is the horse. Horses have excellent taste and smell abilities, enabling them to discriminate between safe and

noxious plants when they are grazing. A horse also uses its sense of smell for detecting predators and threats.

With a long snout, it makes perfect sense that horses would have an extraordinary sense of smell, and with their uncanny intelligence, can be trained to track scents. Consider how well wild horses do on the prairie, evading predators and finding food in very sparse and often hostile conditions.

Search and rescue teams around the west have been working with tracking horses for some time. The training process is similar to the process used for training dogs. Follow a scent to a nearby trainer and get a reward (a treat.) From there the distance is gradually increased.

Some horses will take to this training faster and better than others. Similar to dogs, some horses want to play, push, follow, and

otherwise fool around, rather than get serious about the training. I have had similar experience with training dogs, some take to it, others think it is just playtime.

The use of horses in search and rescue will never replace dogs. Horses have some advantages in certain areas. For example, horses can travel long distances at an efficient pace, while dogs are limited to the pace of their handler, who is on foot in sometimes very rough terrain. The right horse can cover extremely rough country when needed.

A horse stands much taller than a dog, and getting their nose up higher, makes them more likely to detect airborne drift scents. Remember, horses must work into the wind, so a grid or back and forth pattern should be followed.

When a dog gets heated up, they begin to pant, thereby diminishing their sense of smell until they cool down and rest. Horses, when heated up, tend to flair their nostrils, increasing their abilities rather than diminishing them.

Horses have the ability to combine scent detection with acute hearing and monocular vision, providing a spectrum of sensory input that can be tuned by a trainer to facilitate effective search techniques. Remember, their senses are higher off the ground than a dog.

Like dogs, a horse is only as good as their handler or trainer. Getting to know the animal, and their quirks and behavior,

is as much training for the handler as it is for the tracker. I have been afield with scent dogs that were simply a waste of time, and with others that were phenomenal, same with scent tracking horses.

The horse will never take the place of the dog in the search and rescue world. Both have a different mission, and both are well suited for their specific duty. Weld County Search and Rescue has 4 tracking horses on their team. They have miles and miles of open farmland and prairies in their area. For us on the Western Slope, most times dogs fill the need better because of the dense and rocky terrain, but there is a need for both.

It will be interesting to see how the horse tracking use expands over the coming years. Perhaps we will see a mission involving dogs and horses together. Until then, I will keep my relationship with dogs at a personal, not professional level.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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A Burning Question: Western Colorado University researchers challenge long-held assumptions about wilderness, fire, and what it means to care for a landscape

'The most responsible thing we can do is restore the natural processes that we disrupted in the first place'



In a paper recently published in the journal Fire Ecology, researchers explore the benefits of prescribed burns and site places such as California's Yosemite National Park, pictured, where prescribed fire has been used for decades, as a glimpse of what's possible. (Photo/NPS)

By SETH MENSING
WESTERN COLORADO UNIVERSITY

For decades, managing federal wilderness meant keeping our hands off and letting nature take its course, even when there were signs of trouble. But a pair of new studies from faculty and alumni at Western Colorado University suggests it might be time

for a more nuanced approach. In them, graduate researcher Alyssa Worsham and Professor Jonathan Coop ask: What if a greater risk to these places is doing nothing at all?

Fire, by Prescription
It's a question Worsham asks in a new paper titled "When the Wilderness Burns: An Analysis of Current Fire Management

and the Case for Prescribed Fire in Designated Wilderness in the United States," which was recently published in the journal Fire Ecology.

Worsham, who graduated from Western's MEM program in 2023 and now works for the U.S. Forest Service, and her research

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