

In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

Working Like a Dog

USDA trains detector dogs for environmental protection

One of the wonderful things about Labs is their exuberant zest for life. Unfortunately, it's also something that can land them in shelters. Sometimes people unfamiliar with the breed will get a cute Lab puppy without realizing how much exercise and stimulation they need to "behave" at home. After the bored Lab eats a favorite pair of shoes or tears up the yard, the fed-up human relinquishes the pooch to a rescue group.

For some lucky dogs, that's where the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) steps in.

High-energy Labs and Lab-mixes are plucked from shelters around the country to train at the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) National Detector Dog Training Center in Newnan, Georgia. At the 17-acre facility, they learn to

detect and "alert" on scents such as apple, mango, citrus, beef, and pork. After graduating, they help handlers from agencies like the U.S. Customs and Border Protection to search packages for fruit and meat that might have diseases or invasive pests brought in from other countries.

"The dog that doesn't make a really good family pet usually makes a good

USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services Nutria Detector Dog Mya at the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.
(USDA photo by Marnie A. Pepper)



USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services program specialist Carl Dunnock and his Nutria Detector Dog Hektor upon graduation from the Nutria Detector Dog training program at the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland. (USDA photo by Pamela J. Boehland)

working dog because we're looking for dogs that have a lot of energy," says Trent Adamson, supervisory training specialist at the training center. "The dogs that are tearing up your flower gardens and chewing up your garden hoses – those are the dogs that need to be doing something in order to be burning off that energy. With the training program that we have here, we keep them busy every day so we don't have a lot of those issues. We end up with a lot of really, really good dogs that unfortunately were in a home that didn't quite work for them, but worked out really well for them here."

If a dog doesn't graduate, they aren't returned to the shelter; instead, they're adopted into a forever home. The center's kennel can hold up to 100 dogs at a time, and Adamson says his team is always on the lookout for new recruits because demand is so high. Of the 57 dogs currently being trained, 28 are Labs or Lab-mixes (most of the other dogs are beagles).

"Labs are a very important part of the program," Adamson says. "The Lab's demeanor just works really well. For the most part, they're a very gentle dog. They work well around people as long as they've been properly socialized from a young age. It's a great breed."

Labs at the center primarily train to

search pallets of cargo at airports, parcel belts of shipping companies, or vehicles at U.S. borders. If they alert on a target item in a vehicle, they “passive” alert by sitting. If they alert on a parcel, they have an “active” alert and scratch the package. When the handler finds the item of concern, they reward the dog with a treat (another asset Labs bring to the job: they always seem ready for a snack). Food reward is a key element to the positive training methods employed at the center.

Dogs have around 220 million scent receptors in their noses, com-



Marnie and Keeva during training. (USDA-APHIS photo by Tanya Espinosa)



USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services program specialist Lisa Buhr and Nutria Detector Dog Mya at the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. (USDA photo by Marnie A. Pepper)

Marnie and Keeva on the job. (USDA-APHIS photo by Tanya Espinosa)

pared with about five million for humans. So this makes them incredibly valuable for searches. Adamson says that while a human might only be able to search five to eight bags at an airport in an hour, “we can scan hundreds of bags in twenty minutes with a canine.”

According to Adamson, “It’s so much more efficient and productive. A lot of times when these dogs reach their ten thousandth seizure, their handler will send us a photo.... When I think of the impact of a dog that’s been able to seize over ten thousand items, that’s pretty remarkable.”

Sometimes Labs at the National Detector Dog Training Center are tapped for a special conservation project, such as the Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project in Maryland’s

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge and the Delmarva Peninsula.

Nutria are an invasive species of rodent with an extremely high reproductive rate; after a fur farm released a handful of nutria in the area in the 1940s, their population exploded, and they started eating root systems in the wetlands. In some places, they caused permanent

Know of a Potential Detector Dog?

The National Detector Dog Training Center welcomes tips about Labs or Lab-mixes (and beagles/mixes) to train as detector dogs. Dogs should be one to three years old, socialized, energetic, and food-motivated. If a dog seems like a good fit and is medically sound, the center will even arrange for transportation to Georgia. “It’s getting tougher for us to find them because our demand is so high,” says Trent Adamson, supervisory training specialist at the center. “We need more dogs.”

Please call the procurement hotline at 844-876-3755 or e-mail: USDAcanineprocurement@aphis.usda.gov.





A USDA-APHIS yellow Lab inspecting a vehicle. (USDA-APHIS photo by Tanya Espinosa)

damage, affecting native animals like muskrat, waterfowl, fish, and crabs.

Since 2004, Labs have been instrumental in conservation efforts to eradicate nutria from over a quarter million acres of the Delmarva Peninsula. Initially, local trappers and wildlife officials used their personal hunting dogs to help locate nutria. In 2014, official

FOR MORE INFORMATION

USDA APHIS National Detector Dog Training Center

<http://blogs.usda.gov/tag/national-detector-dog-training-center>

Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project

https://www.fws.gov/chesapeakeanutriaproject/detector_dogs.html

detector dogs trained to alert on nutria scat joined the team.


Marnie Pepper, Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project leader and certified field canine handler/trainer, searches with Keeva, a black Lab who trained at the National Detector Dog Training Center.

"You're looking for a small, brown, maybe an inch-long piece of scat in a very muddy, highly vegetated wetland. It is like finding a needle in a haystack," Pepper says. "So it makes us much more efficient if we have a nose that can sniff it out."

Keeva is "like a tornado" when confined to a house, but relaxed and focused in the field, so she's an ideal detector dog. Pepper does everything she can to set up her canine partner for success.

"If the wind is coming from a certain direction, I want to start the survey so that she's working into the wind. If I know the terrain's going to be a little bit challenging, I've got to make sure that I set the pace so that she's not exhausted – though generally that's not a problem," she says with a laugh.

Because the team spends so much time searching in water, Keeva's reward for a find is a toy instead of a treat. "It doesn't matter if a toy gets wet or dirty as long as it squeaks," Pepper says.

She says it's "amazing" to be able to work so successfully with a non-human partner – especially one with unbridled enthusiasm for the job. "She's excited to go to work – she nearly pulls my arm out of the socket. We can communicate very effectively and we don't even speak the same language. It's a lot of fun." 



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is an award-winning member of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and

her husband adopted a loveable Lab mix named Rio. Please share tips for future columns about Labs and working dog organizations that help make our world a better place at: jen@jenreeder.com.



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