



Something's in the air

Above: A handler and his dog deep in the New Zealand wilderness; Right: Search and Rescue personnel unload from a helicopter in preparation for another operation; Far right: LandSAR dogs are go-anywhere dogs



WITH THEIR KEEN SENSE OF SMELL, DOGS ARE A USEFUL ALLY WHEN IT COMES TO SEARCHING FOR MISSING PEOPLE, WRITES LAND SEARCH AND RESCUE VOLUNTEER VLADKA KENNETT

It is really great to see that you are operating in the area." I hear the voice from behind while descending the Caples Track with my four-legged friend who is wearing his orange hi-vis vest. The comment comes from a group of American trampers walking the Caples/Greenstone circuit. "Well, this is just a training mission," I reply, and explain the 'big picture' on

how these things work here in New Zealand. I would love to say that we do operate, as a part of my job, in this beautiful part of the South Island. However, Jacques, my three-year-old black Labrador, and I are Land Search and Rescue volunteers based in Glenorchy and specialise in air-scenting search and rescue – in snow, bush and wilderness.



Jacques is an operational LandSAR Avalanche dog. For this reason he is one of only five other dogs in the Wakatipu area allowed to train in parts of Mt Aspiring National Park. It is a privilege, but extremely important to give Jacques the experience that will help during a live search when LandSAR dogs are an invaluable part of an operation.

An air-scenting dog searches for airborne human scent, as opposed to scent on the ground such as the track left by the people (or in our lingo 'subjects') passing. Because of the manner in which scent can stay airborne while it is carried by wind over long distances, air-scenting dogs are hugely beneficial in helping to search large areas. Air-scenting dogs are not scent-discriminating and will search for any human scent in the area. This means that while their effectiveness can be greatly reduced in highly populated areas, they are ideal for searching the wilderness.

Air-scenting dogs can work in all conditions, any time of day or night, and at any length of time after the subject has been missing.

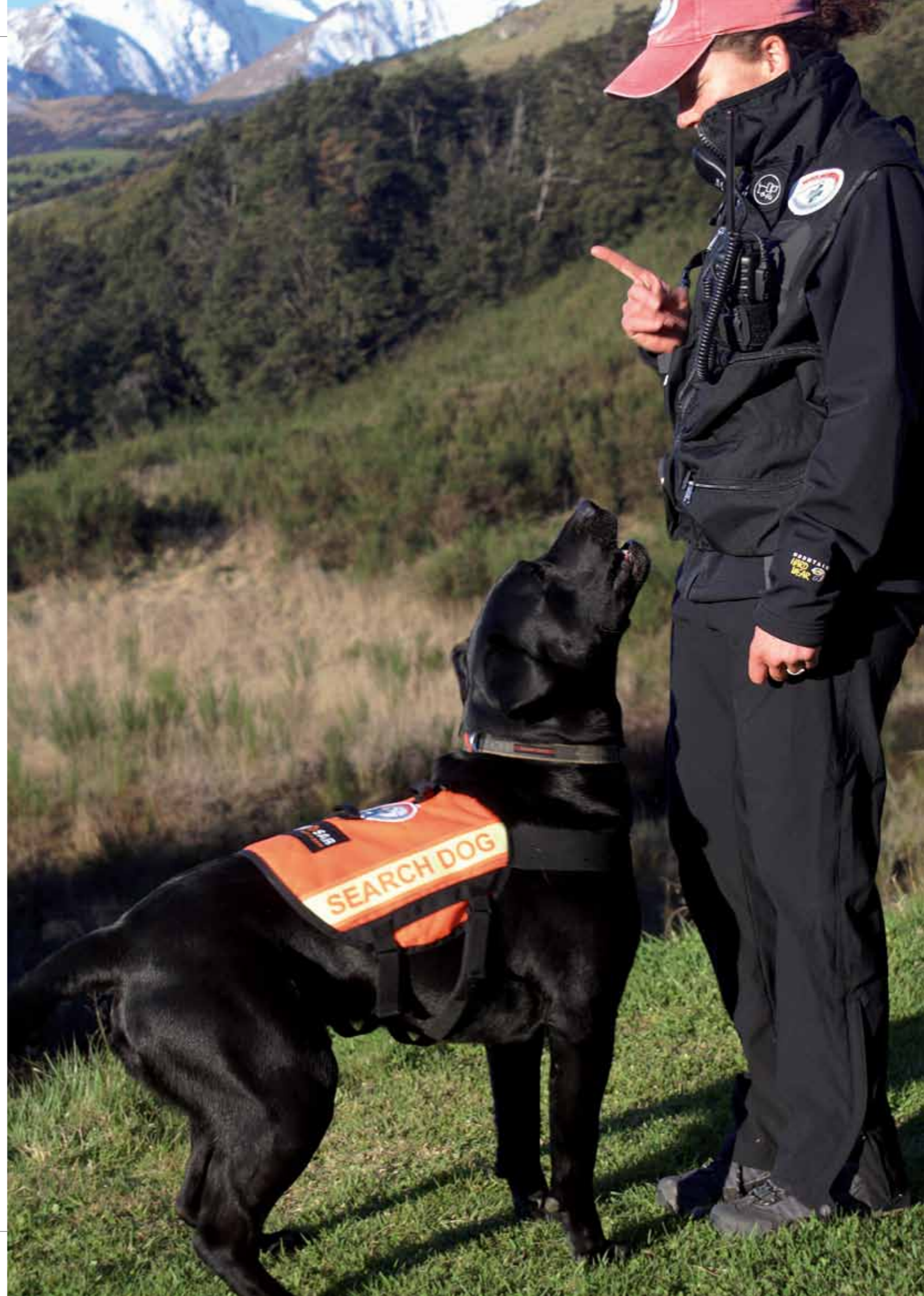
How do air-scenting dogs work?

The handler and dog are assigned an area to search. Typically, the area is cleared by walking in a grid pattern cutting back and forth across the width of the area. The dogs do not work on a leash and they are free to explore scents of interest, but each dog develops a comfortable ranging distance from their handler which they will not exceed. This is one of the great values of an air-scenting dog as it allows the handler to walk a wide grid.

The fact that the air-scenting dog stays within a certain distance of the handler makes the handler responsible for placing the dog in areas of the highest probability for detecting scent. Being able to do this effectively involves a good understanding of how airborne scent travels. When the dog detects scent, it will follow it to the source by staying in the area containing scent and moving upwind. This means the subject can be found from great distances away.



Top: During a simple run-off exercise, Jacques finds the subject and returns to Vladka to let her know; Far left and left: Jacques has picked up a scent and returns to Vladka when he has found the subject Right: Once he's found the subject, Jacques runs to Vladka and barks





LandSAR volunteers and their dogs must be prepared to work in all conditions

What happens when an air-scenting dog makes a find?

One of the difficulties with working off-leash is initially the handler may be unaware that the dog has made a find, especially if the missing person is somehow hidden from view. Therefore, upon making a find, the air-scenting dog initiates a trained pattern of behaviour that ensures the handler gets to the subject. A dog will return to its handler, perform an 'indication' (a behaviour that lets the handler know the dog has made a find) and returns to the subject, this time with the handler following closely. This behaviour, known as the 're-find', is the subject of much of the dog's training. An alternative method is 'stay and speak', where the dog stays with the subject and indicates by barking until the handler arrives.

A little bit of training – how do we start it all?

Training an air-scenting LandSAR dog is a long process which must be tailored to each dog. When I got Jacques as a

puppy, I took the time to bond with him before beginning any training. No amount of training can fix the fact that the dog doesn't want to work for you. As Brent MacDonald, one of the other dog handlers in Wakatipu, says: "A dog will work 10 times better if it wants to, 20 times better if it's having fun, but only begrudgingly if it has to."

I always keep in mind that the search must be the ultimate game for the dog. Dogs that do not enjoy searching will give an unreliable performance. On the other hand, dogs that love to search will perform strongly for long hours. A close relationship with the dog will ensure that the handler doesn't have any problems.

I spent as much time as I could with Jacques when he was a puppy; teaching him what body language, facial expressions, and vocalisation meant. I take him with me wherever possible and play with him often. I always take every opportunity to expose Jacques to new surroundings, situations, obstacles and distractions. During searches, we work in a great variety of situations and the dog must remain comfortable and confident. Doing so requires him to be obedient and agile. As a result, Jacques happily travels by helicopter, on a skidoo, by chairlift or a jetboat (OK, that last one not so happily – in fact he hates it!).

Search training begins with imprinting. It starts simply by walking along and going up to someone (finding them) sitting on the trail. The dog is then generously rewarded by the subject. The purpose is to establish subject loyalty. For learning, it is best if the person to be 'found' is a stranger to the dog. The dog-handler team progress by making this more difficult – getting the subject to sit off the trail, moving further into the bush and so on.

Run-offs are also added to the training. In this exercise, the subject runs away from the puppy with a toy while the handler holds the dog. When the subject stops, the handler issues a

find command and releases the dog. When the puppy reaches the subject, he is praised and rewarded with play, which is the reward of choice.

As I bonded with Jacques, I learned quite quickly which modes of play he prefers and what kind of toy he likes. 'Play Drive', or later, when the dog matures, 'Prey Drive', is the most important factor in the dog's motivation. But it always has to be remembered that the handler remains the alpha 'dog' of the pack and the dog should never dominate.

As I train my dog, I must also train myself. In the field, the dog is responsible for searching the area using his nose. As the handler, I am responsible for positioning the dog in a high-probability area, to take the best advantage of scenting conditions, keeping track of my map position, communicating with base, and so forth. In searches, dog tasks are typically led by the dog handler. Therefore, I have to acquire the knowledge and leadership skills necessary to lead a team in the wilderness.

What dog handlers actually do

During a search, the dog handler must perform all the tasks necessary to ensure that the search for the subject is carried out efficiently and thoroughly. But the handler has many responsibilities away from the search as well.

During a real, or live, search operation, the dog team will be assigned one or more areas of land to search and clear. Whilst doing this, the handler must also be able to carry out:

- Wilderness navigation
- Radio operation
- Supervision of other team members
- Analysis of the situation and forming the best strategy for searching the area
- Evacuating the missing person/people when found
- Ensuring their own safety in tough conditions

An operational dog handler is expected to respond to a search in any weather, at any time of the day or night. A person's life is often at stake and the handler cannot shy away from uncomfortable conditions.



Above: Life as an operational search dog is nothing if not adventurous; Left: Nothing fazes this rescue hound

He or she must be fit enough to handle rough terrain and adverse conditions, and needs to be aware of and ready to face any fears that may occur in the wilderness. The dog handler needs to act without panicking in a crisis and has to accept a degree of risk to themselves and their dog when entering into a search and rescue situation.

Finally, it's important to acknowledge that not all subjects are found in good health or even alive. The potential for finding a badly injured or deceased person is an unfortunate reality. The emotional stress involved is quite severe and the handler must be ready to accept this.

Search and Rescue is an enjoyable and incredibly rewarding endeavour – this is the real reason that LandSAR volunteers stay involved. It's definitely the reason Jacques and I volunteer and will continue to do so.

For more information about LandSAR or the Wakatipu SAR Dog Team visit www.wakatipusar.co.nz or www.landsar.co.nz