

# **Summit to Sound Search and Rescue**

## **How to Approach A Dog**

### **The problem:**

Upon seeing a search dog, many people immediately want to pet it. This is a natural response, and many dogs enjoy the experience when it is done right. These same people who want to express affection can be bitten by the dog for what the dog sees as perfectly legitimate reasons.

### **Speaking dog fluently:**

Who's who? The dog doesn't know you, and you don't know the dog. Using people language, ask the handler if you may pet the dog. If he or she says no, accept that. Most of the time, the answer is that you may pet the dog. Now, using dog language, ask if you may pet the dog. A respectful dog will not stare into the eyes of another dog, so look off to the side of the dog you greet. (Avoid looking into the eyes. In dog language, the eye-to-eye stare or gaze is a challenge to show dominance. Avoiding eye contact tells the dog you do not want to dominate, you want be friendly.) Second, do not reach or bend your body to come over the dog you are greeting. Stay in front, standing. Make a fist and slowly lower the fist to about knee height, or to the dog's nose level, whichever is higher. Look at the horizon or at the trees next to you so the dog perceives no eye-contact at all. When the dog nuzzles your hand, a calm voice introduction is in order, something like, "Hi, there, pup." The dog may lick your fist... if it does you can slowly open your hand. If the dog wants to be petted, it will probably walk so your hand flows down its side. You can talk more to the dog, pat gently or stroke its side in the direction the hair is pointing. Gradually you can bring your gaze about to meet the dog's gaze. This is a polite greeting which shows the dog you have good (dog) manners.

If you come home from a brutal day at work, tired and hot and hungry and sore, how would you respond if a stranger jumped out and grabbed you when you just hit the couch for a quick nap? That's why some dogs are grumpy when they get back from a search. Give them a while to get work and fatigue out of the head and body.

Just because a dog comes up to you does not mean it is seeking your affection. Our dogs are trained to "check people out," so walking up to you is a part of their job. Let them do their job without distracting them by petting, grabbing, calling or whistling.

Any physical activity directed toward the handler can elicit protective behavior from a dog. Search dogs bond deeply with their handlers; the gentlest “pussy-cat” of a dog can be quite assertive if it perceives a threat to its favorite person. Horseplay should never be allowed around dogs. At night, the dogs are less able to see all of what is going on around them. If you reach out of the dark to grab a handler, be aware that the search dog may make sure your wrist is in its mouth for safe-keeping until the handler assures the dog you are accepted. Walking normally around dogs fits their mental profile of people who are “OK.”

Always ask the handler if you may give the dog a treat before giving the dog anything to eat. Many dog handlers have thousands of dollars and thousands of hours in training their dogs. These handlers are very fussy about what their dogs eat, so always ask. Most handlers will tell you how to present the treat to the dog; follow their directions! While the dog will not bite you hard, presenting food in a way that the dog does not understand may lead him or her to bite for it quickly, catching your hand or fingers in the process. If the handler doesn't offer suggestions on how to present the treat, ASK.

Most search dogs spend a lot of time in “their” trucks and cars with the search gear. Please keep back about 20' from the vehicles when the dogs are in their vehicles or being loaded or unloaded. The dogs are protective of “their” territory. If you walk by 20' away staring into the truck, you are likely to be greeted with a growl. You are being impolite, in the dog's language of gesture and behavior. It is the same thing as looking a stranger up and down, and when they turn to see what you want, you reply, “Are you lookin' for a fight?”

While dogs are being unloaded, they are usually getting ready to respond to an assignment. They are excited and focused on the handler, so they are likely to be bothered by your desire to pet them. Ask the handler during “down time” if you can visit with the dog. We've already discussed why you shouldn't try to pet the dog when it comes back from an assignment....

Search dogs are usually well trained, obedient, sensitive and level-headed dogs who love to work. They see the work as a way to have fun with their favorite person. The dogs have several levels of obedience classes successfully completed, they have their Canine Good Citizen certificates, and they have thousands of hours of search training. They are usually dominant and very highly focused on the work they know. Each is an individual and each can be great company when you know how to include them in the conversation. Now, turn around three times while staring at the carpet, lie down, and pant with us for a while....