



FRIENDLY CREATURES

Your solution to animal behavioural problems

Tracking for Beginners

Dogs love using their nose. Unfortunately most companion dogs don't get the opportunity to really enjoy this skill and get the calming benefits that it brings. When we walk our dogs on the pavement on the way to the park, it is annoying if they keep stopping to sniff gateways and walls. If they are off lead and suddenly get the scent of food, we usually have to run after them calling them away to stop them eating chicken bones. If they get the scent of deer in the forest and run off across roads, it is scary.

By deliberately teaching our dogs to follow a scent, we can exercise them and mentally stimulate them in a controlled but fun way. Once the dog uses up energy tracking, often other problems of displaced exuberance are alleviated. Non-competitive tracking training can be part of an ordinary walk and help develop the bond with our dog.

Tracking is also done competitively as a component of Working Trials for dogs:

<http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/activities/working-trials/>

When we first start, it can be very frustrating that our dogs don't seem motivated by the trail. The secret is to have a very motivated (hungry dog) and make it very easy to start with. Tracking takes a lot of stamina and concentration so initially have very short training sessions, going into the wind, and finish when the dog has had a mini success.

Additionally there are lots of exercises we can do at home. We can teach our dog to lie down and wait when they have found the food pot. We can put them in a "Wait" and go and hide a toy or food treat and then send them off to find it. We should also get our dog used to wearing the harness that they will be wearing specially for tracking, so they don't feel inhibited and uncomfortable when the time comes.

Beginners tracking involves the tracklayer arranging an easy trail of food drops at every pace in a straight line into the wind. The tracklayer walks back in the same line, avoids eye contact with our dog and goes behind us. We put our dogs "tracking harness" on and encourage him to set off. When our dog can follow this trail easily, the food becomes four little food pots, spaced farther apart in a straight line going into the wind (or on a windless day) in reasonably long grass. The dog learns to follow the scent of the disturbed vegetation, where the tracklayer's footprints went, so long grass is easier. When he gets to a food pot our dogs lies down and waits to indicate that they have found it. We reward them with a piece of food from the pot and then send them on to the next pot.

When our dog is confident in these conditions, tracking is made more challenging by increasing the difficulty, one aspect at a time.

This is what an expert tracker looks like:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riqljzseIy0>

Good luck!