Canines On A Mission

The Department's new K9 team has hit the

by Clarke C. Jones

"We gotta go!" Pointing gun…country road…wife…that's all I hear. We are on our way. We speed south on Route 20. The blue lights are flashing atop the SUV: We are lit up like a Christmas tree.

Up ahead we see a car in our lane. Richard hits the siren. On a two-lane, country road with hills and turns there are few places to pass the slower car. To my amazement, the car in front of us makes no attempt to pull over to the right and ambles on its way. So, I'm thinking, this is how it looks when you're driving an emergency vehicle. I could feel my blood pressure rise with frustration, impatience.

"You never know what people are going to do in front of you," mutters Richard. "I have had people literally stop in the middle of the road on a hill and try to wave me around. Of course, you cannot see what is coming from the other direction in a situation like that, and the person in the car in front of you is looking at you—like there is something wrong with *you*." As if on cue, the driver in front of us stops in the road, and then makes a left turn. I guess the logic here is, "I am only a mile from my house so you'll just have to wait till I get home." Incredible!

Richard steps on the gas and we press on, siren wailing.

Richard is Conservation Police Officer Richard M. Howald, with the Department. Packed into Richard's SUV are Jessica Whirley—an officer (CPO) from Prince Edward County—me, and Scout, a female Labrador retriever. As one of three Labrador retrievers used by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) to track suspects, Scout also helps find evidence and locate fish or other wildlife that may be in the possession of, or hidden by, a suspected game violator. Right now, all we know is that a gun has been pointed at a citizen and the address where the reported incident has occurred.

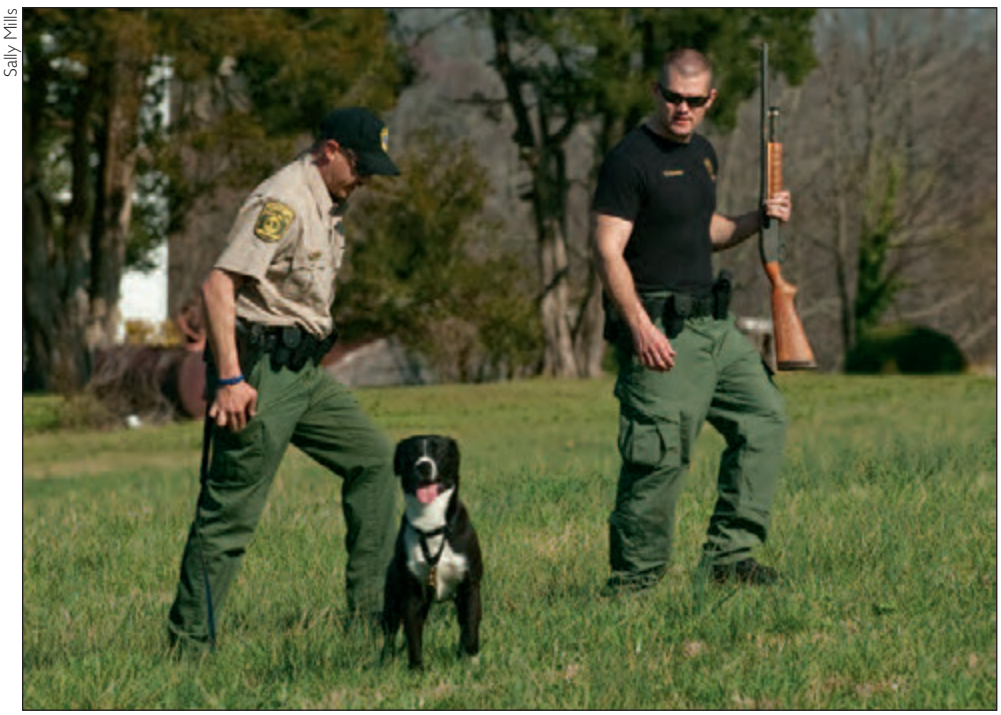
When we arrive at the scene, none of the people who were pointing the gun are still around. The alleged victim is not on-site but his angry, upset wife is. The last thing she is thinking about is calming down. If a gun has been pointed at *your* spouse, you can understand why!

Richard and Jessica must begin to build the case to bring an alleged criminal to justice. The woman does not have any license numbers of the vehicles involved. She thinks she knows the identities of some of the people who pointed the gun at her husband, but couldn't swear to it. She says her husband does know. Then she tells the officers what the laws are regarding possession of firearms and hunting along a road. She is wrong. But, of course, she can't be wrong because that is what her husband told her!

Here is where problems occur. So many people—even lifelong hunters—frequently do not know the game laws in their own county. There is not much the officers can do at this point but ask the wife to have the husband call them to try to get more information. About a half-hour later, the husband calls and Jessica speaks to him. He is upset and wants the officers to take action. Jessica explains to him that no *game* laws have been broken and that he will need to speak to the county magistrate and swear out a warrant against the alleged perpetrator for brandishing a firearm. The man does not like this. I can hear his, ahem, displeasure in the comments coming from the phone Officer Whirley is holding to her ear.

It is the job of the conservation police officer to protect not just wildlife, but also the hunter's rights and the landowner's rights. Protecting all three can lead to confusion and frustration. Just before the pointing gun call came in, we had spent over three hours bouncing around the rutted back roads of Cumberland and Buckingham counties, checking for possible game violations. I quickly realized that the life of a CPO is not the glamorous job I thought it was. It is dangerous, tedious, often thankless work requiring patience and diplomacy that few of us have or would tolerate. Employment as a conservation police officer in Virginia may look like something you would want to do, but only a select few can do this job and do it well. It takes exceptional skill and judgment

Sally Mills



CPO Frank Spuchesi with his partner, "Comet," train for evidence recovery with the assistance of CPO Wayne Billhimer.

ground running!

to handle non-routine, sometimes life-threatening, events and make them appear routine.

For the CPO, hunting season is not only a busy season; it can also be a holiday season. While you are relaxing at the table with family at Thanksgiving, sitting around a cozy fire on Christmas Day, or planning New Year's celebrations, our CPOs are patrolling in the cold, wind, rain, and snow protecting wildlife, property, and you. And because felons like to work in the dark, the CPO has to be out then too.

When responding to an emergency report, a CPO may have to quickly drive 20 or more miles along winding, rural roads to reach the site of the incident. If you are a CPO with a Labrador, it is not uncommon to be called to a location over two hours from your base. So you not only have to know your territory and the players in it, you must also know all the game laws of the counties in your district, as well as the *state*. Each county has a certain amount of leeway when writing their hunting rules—and the rules are not consistent among localities. During my ride-along

Sally Mills

CPO Wes Billings and partner "Josie" look for an article hidden in the ground, as CPO Wayne Billhimer looks on. Right, CPO Megan Vick works her dog, Jake, during a field exercise.

Courtesy of Conservation Officer Jeff Milner, Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources

A Brief Overview

The Department's K9 program has been generating great results. In fact, the original team of three dogs with handlers (shown right) has recently expanded to five, with the addition of "Comet," handled by CPO Frank Spuchesi, and "Josie," handled by CPO Wes Billings. Colonel Dabney Watts leads the Law Enforcement Division and has only positive things to say about the program.

Col. Watts provided some background during a recent interview. He was quick to note that DGIF is indebted to the K9 Academy at the Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources, a 14-year program run by Conservation Officer Jeff Milner, who provided training for these dogs and their handlers at no charge. Other state wildlife agencies assisted, too, by sharing with our CPOs their experiences and lessons learned over the years. Two of the dogs in the first "class" were generously donated to Virginia's program by the Kansas Dept. of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism.

Virginia's K9 Wildlife Team uses sporting breeds. The dogs are trained in three areas specific to the Department's wildlife mission: tracking, wildlife detection, and article/evidence recovery. After an intensive 8-week course, the teams are ready to take on assignments. Each dog knows what is required during a particular operation by the type of collar or harness placed on him by the handler. Likewise, in the field the dog lets the officer know he has discovered something by "alerting" the CPO with a specific body movement. In the case of article recovery, for example, the dog would make a digging motion.

With time and experience, K9 partners become accustomed to working together in the field—a process that can take six to eight months. The biggest, single advantage to the agency is the manpower saved during search (and sometimes, rescue) operations. The K9 team has also proven valuable in educating the public about the work our law enforcement officers perform. Sporting breeds are a good choice for this aspect of the mission, since they are comfortable around people. Officers in the program are available for demonstrations to schools and other groups.

For more information about the program and to make a donation, go to: http://vawildlife.org/k-9.html.

–SHM

Lee Walker

The K9 team was launched with 3 officers, shown here: CPO Vick, with Jake; CPO Billhimer, with Justice; and CPO Howald, with Scout—in partnership with the Wildlife Foundation of Virginia.

with Officers Howald and Whirley, I also began to get a clearer picture of how much "sufficient" evidence a CPO must have to even bring a case to court, much less win it. I also got some sense of the volume of paperwork and reporting required for each incident.

A quiet break for lunch today is out of the question. We drive on, checking out old logging roads and farm roads. As we approach a power line easement, we can see that clover has been planted in the clearing. We look around and discover a blind. The officers make a note of it. Sometimes it's these little discoveries that lead to bigger things.

We approach some woods and stop to give Scout a quick, mandatory training lesson. This must be documented for both DGIF and court records when the evidence of, or pursuit and capture of, an alleged violator involves one of the dogs. Richard places an object in the woods along a leafy, logging road. Scout does not know where it is. Richard paints me the scenario that I have spotted someone in the woods who then takes off when he sees me. I grab Scout, put on his tracking lead, and take off in pursuit. The culprit has hidden himself, thinking there is no way you will find him in these woods with the head start he has on you. But then he sees the Lab following his tracks, coming toward him. About 50 yards away from the officer he bolts and throws something to his right. The officer apprehends the suspect and learns that he is a convicted felon. If the object he threw was a gun, the felon now has bigger issues.

Now the daylight is fading and, in all the commotion, the officer only has a *general* idea of where the object may be. Before the Department's K9 program started in 2011, the officer might have to call in one or two other officers to help search for the weapon, spending time, energy, and the taxpayers' money to help locate it. I have a general idea of where the object is (the object that the felon threw away) and then Officer Howald sends Scout and me to look for it. I immediately go in the direction I think the object is located. Scout just knows she is to look for something. We both walk past it.

I want to outwit the dog in this high-stakes Easter egg hunt and am looking hard in the leaves. Scout comes back to a place we passed and "alerts" at a particular location I have just covered. Richard gives Scout a verbal signal and Scout, by her actions, reinforces the fact that she has found something. Richard then rewards Scout with about five minutes of playtime, which the Lab obviously enjoys. Scout has been trained that her "treat" is play and she will work her hardest for a little playtime with Richard!

The value of these Labs is proven almost every day. Richard tells me of one violator he caught who told him, "I was hoping you were off today. I've heard about you and that dog."

That sentiment is echoed by CPO Megan Vick, who initially proposed—and persuaded—the Law Enforcement Division to consider undertaking a K9 program. Vick did her homework and discovered that other state wildlife agencies with K9 units had experienced great success; yet, the programs are young and there are very few wildlife dog handlers nationwide.

According to Vick, "One of the immediate benefits of this program is the amount of manpower we save. If we are looking for a shotgun or a shotgun shell, it may take the dog six to eight minutes to find it. Without the dog, we would need a team of four to five people to be able to cover the same territory, and

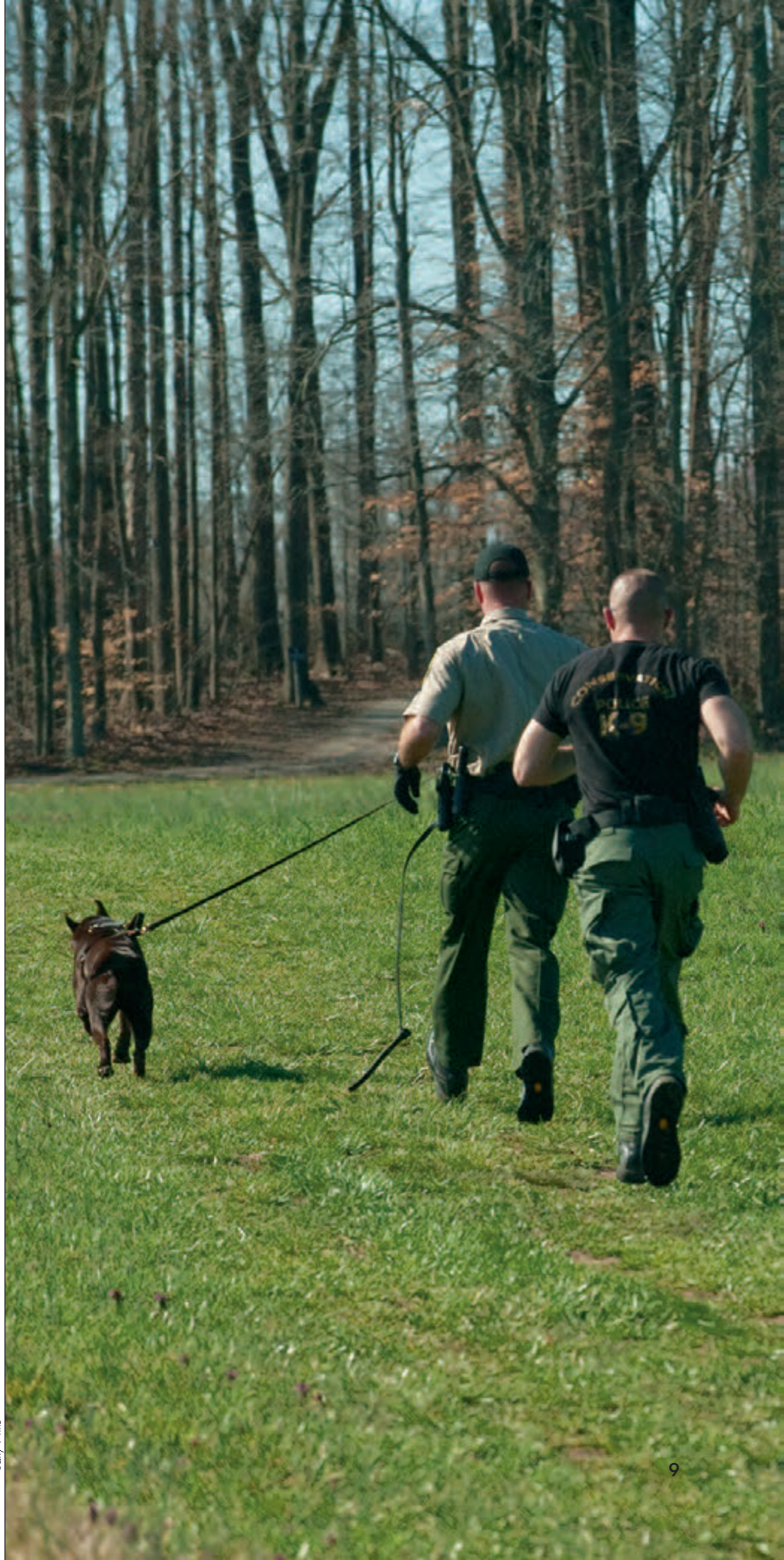
even after hours of work, still may not find what we are looking for." Vick's district covers much of southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore—a broad territory and something not uncommon for today's CPOs.

When you think about it, other than a spear, man's first hunting aid was a dog. It helped him track, find, and run down game, and at times, it has acted as an early warning device. Hundreds of centuries later, even with all the technology a CPO has at his or her disposal, we have realized the advantage of reintroducing the dog to again track suspects, find wild game, and uncover evidence.

We continue making the rounds and head off along another country road. We approach a pick-up parked off the asphalt near some woods. Driving past the truck, we follow an old, overgrown farm road deep into Cumberland County. As we turn around a sharp bend we suddenly come upon six hunters with shotguns. They look the way *anyone* looks who is having a party and some uninvited people decide to crash it. Normally, I wouldn't crash a party hosted by people carrying shotguns. Officer Howald tells me to stay in the car as he and Officer Whirley get out to check everyone's license. The two officers chat a bit with the hunters and then ask to see their licenses. It all looks very routine but I could not help but wonder how I would react if I was on patrol alone and found six hunters who may not have been obeying the law. What then?

After the license check, we head back to Cumberland Courthouse and my ride home. CPO Whirley has to prepare for a spotlighting stakeout, meaning she will not go off duty until around midnight—a long day in anyone's book. As I say goodbye to Officers Howald and Whirley, and assistant Scout, I think about special times hunting with my father, or fishing with my friends, and I silently give thanks for the conservation police officers who safeguard our opportunity to make more of those memories in the future.

Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends his spare time with his black lab, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can read more by Clarke at www.clarkecjones.com.



Whether performing article recovery or tracking or wildlife detection, time is a pressing concern. Canine handlers and their dogs must be in top physical condition.

Sally Mills