

Sit. Stay. Save a Cheetah.

Full story, Christine Bartos, Lead Keeper

“Dogs help people in many ways – from herding livestock to guiding the blind. More recently, they also help in the fight to save endangered species. With one-eighth of their brain dedicated to olfaction, more than 220 million scent receptors in their noses, and a willingness to work with humans, dogs can locate things by scent that their handlers would find nearly impossible. Dogs have been trained to find explosives, drugs, cadavers, lost persons and even certain types of tumors. Dr. Sam Wasser of the University of Washington, Center for Conservation Biology was the first to realize that dogs could be trained to help researchers in the field by locating the scat of a particular species.



In 2004 I was privileged to meet Dr. Laurie Marker, Director of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) during her US tour. As a long time admirer of Dr. Marker’s work, I took the opportunity to introduce myself. I asked her about the guard dog project, and she seemed surprised at that – apparently people rarely ask one of the world’s experts on cheetahs about dogs! I explained that my interest in the project stemmed from a lifetime of training dogs. Even so, I had not heard of scat sniffing dogs and when Dr. Marker told me about them, I was fascinated. She was hoping to get a scat detection dog for CCF, and when she asked me about the possibility of training one, the partnership was born.

After researching scat dogs, I felt that I was ready to start, but first I had to find the right dog. One of the groups that I contacted was Mid-Atlantic border collie rescue. The coordinator felt that she didn’t have a dog in rescue that would fit my needs, but that she would be willing to donate a pup from her own recent litter. A puppy would be a huge gamble since it would be impossible to determine its personality at such a young age, but these were well-bred working border collies and I felt that they had great potential. I chose Finn, the pup that showed the most promise at 7 weeks of age, and in the spring of 2007 we were ready to start our journey.

I had never trained a detection dog before, so this was a learning experience for me. Since Finn was so young, I began with basic obedience and a solid recall. He learned to range out away from me on walks, but return immediately when called. I discovered his favorite toy – a tennis ball on a rope – and that became his reward for

finding scat. When he was a few months old I began his scent training. I kept a supply of frozen scat for training (thanks to the Zoo cheetahs) and began by simply allowing him to sniff the scat and immediately rewarding him with a spirited game of tug using his special toy. The training got more complex as Finn got better. The samples were hidden in more difficult locations and Finn was learning to search as well as to sit as an indication when he found one.

In the summer of 2008 CCF offered to fly Finn and I to Washington State to work with Dr. Wasser's team. Finn's unflappable nature showed as he handled the flight easily. I learned a lot about scat dog training and practiced both with Finn and with the Center's dogs. I returned home with a stronger training plan as well as exercises to use to fine tune Finn's work. By spring 2009 it was time to plan our trip to Namibia.

Planning a flight to Windhoek is one thing. Planning it with a dog is another thing entirely. Considering Finn would be covering nearly 9,000 miles, it was important to make the trip as safe for him as possible. We both made it safely to Windhoek, and Finn was quite happy to have his feet firmly on the ground.

Finn quickly adjusted to his new home at CCF, although he was quite wary of real cheetahs. I was able to stay for three weeks to help him make the transition and to teach the CCF staff how to work with him. The first few days were spent going on long walks. It was important for Finn to get a feel for the area as well as learn not to chase wildlife - warthogs are always tempting but very dangerous to a 40-pound dog! As always, Finn was responsive and his basic training paid off. As he settled in, we began doing scat drills in a confined area, then expanded the range until we felt that we were ready to take Finn out in the field for the first time. We took him to a location where wild cheetahs were known to frequent and on his first day he found five scat samples - four of which we would not have found without him. We worked in and around the CCF cheetah pens over my last week and Finn was proving himself more and more every day. As he continued to do well, I realized that my work was done and it was time to leave Finn at CCF and head home.

Regular updates from CCF report that Finn is working out well and has matured into a hard working, dependable member of the CCF team. He has worked with several handlers, and has turned out to be a valuable asset in the fight to save wild cheetahs."