



## **Tracking With Seniors Part Two**

By Rosemary Janoch

In the article *Tracking With Seniors Part One*, considerations for tracking with an older dog were discussed. In this article, I will mention a few precautions that should be taken by all tracking handlers in general, but which are particularly important if the tracker is a "senior" handler.

First of all, track with a group whenever possible. There is always safety in numbers. If no one can accompany you out into the field on a particular day, then at least notify someone that you will be out tracking until such and such an hour and will call them when you get home to let them know how the training session went. If you don't return at the prescribed hour, you know that at least one person will know that you are overdue.

If you are tracking in the local park system, make an effort to make friends with the local park rangers. If you speak to them each time you track there, in no time at all the

rangers will recognize your car and know where you are and what you are doing. If your car is still there at the end of the ranger's eight hour shift, you can be sure that there will be a park ranger roaming through the fields wondering where you are. Bringing a cake or some cookies for the rangers once in a while wouldn't hurt either. Being friendly to park rangers, and being on a first name basis with them, is some of the cheapest insurance you will ever be able to buy.

If there are no park rangers where you track, try leaving a note on your car stating where you are and the approximate time of your return. I would feel safe doing this where I track. If you are not comfortable with leaving a note on your car in your part of the country, then by all means don't do it.

Keep your car in good shape. You do not want to be stranded somewhere by yourself. This means good tires, a good battery, a good ignition, and a full tank of gas. Even with all that, I would still hope for the best and plan for the worst, so have a working cell phone with you.

Since cell phones don't always work in remote areas, and since you might hear the voices of a family walking along the bridal path only a short distance away from you, always carry a good whistle with you also. Field exhibitors already have whistles whose sound can be heard for great distances. The rest of you need to get one. When my husband and I learned first learned the sport of orienteering, it was emphasized to us that we should never leave the parking lot without having our map, our compass, and our whistle. Although orienteering is a competitive sport for many people, every single competitor will stop dead in their tracks at the sound of a whistle and will begin searching for the lost or injured person. A whistle has two advantages over your voice. It can be heard over greater distances, and it will last longer. Think about it...how many times can you yell "Help!" at the top of your lungs until you have no voice left?

However, I would still suggest you carry a cell phone with you. This does not mean have a cell phone in your car. This means carry a cell phone with *you*! If you step into a gopher hole and twist an ankle out in the field, the cell phone back in your car isn't going to be of much help. A cell phone in your back pocket, however, is going to be a godsend.

Why not prevent that twisted ankle in the first place? Be alert to where you are walking. Always wear appropriate footwear. Your boots should have good arch support and ankle support. If they are not waterproof, then wear sealskin socks. These socks are designed to let your boots get soaking wet and yet keep your feet dry and toasty warm.

All senior citizens need to be aware of the fact that they cannot stay as warm as they once could, nor can they cool off as rapidly as in the past. Dressing in layers is important for warmth as well as to aid in cooling down. Prevent overheating. Keep yourself hydrated by drinking plenty of water. Carry a bottle of water right out into the field with you while you are walking the track.

Even in the warm summer months, seniors might consider wearing a lightweight, long sleeve shirt and long pants. For those who take blood thinners, a scratch or cut from a tree branch or bush can be very messy. Carry a small wallet with you that contains your name and phone number, a list of prescription medications you are taking, your doctor's name and phone number, and the name and phone number of someone to call in case of an emergency.

Both young and old handlers are guilty of not using sunscreen often enough. Put sunscreen on each time you are going out to track, and reapply it if you are going to stay

out for an extended period of time. Along with the sunscreen, protect yourself by wearing a hat. This is particularly useful if your hair is getting a little thin. There is nothing worse than a sunburn on the top of your head, or at least that's what my husband claims!

While you are putting that bottle of sunscreen in your car, put in some insect repellent, too. The type and strength of insect repellent used will no doubt vary with where in the country you are tracking, but some sort of protection should be used especially if Lyme disease, West Nile virus, or St. Louis encephalitis is prevalent in your location.

Condition yourself just as you would condition your dog. Take long brisk walks. Build up your endurance so that walking a track and then running it with your dog does not overly stress you. Always be aware of how you feel physically and whether you might be overexerting yourself. Take along a folding chair and sit for a while after finishing a track. Not only can you settle down and catch your breath, but if you brought some grapes, an orange, a peach, or some other juicy fruit, you can also refresh yourself before leaving for home.

Be mindful of any medications you are currently taking. Do they make you drowsy? Lightheaded? If so, tracking alone is a recipe for disaster. Track only when someone else can accompany you. If you take high blood pressure medicine, for example, and light headedness is a problem, be sure that when you bend over to reward your dog or pick up an article, you stand erect slowly and continue to stand there until you are steady on your feet again before you move on. If someone is not available to go tracking with you on a particular day, however, please consider using that day to condition your dog and yourself with long walks through the neighborhood where you will always be within sight and sound of your neighbors.

Do weather conditions effect you? If your arthritis acts up on cold, wet days then learn to spend those days in another constructive way such as reading the newest tracking book that is out on the market. Don't bemoan it as a wasted day. Don't torture yourself and make yourself physically uncomfortable just for the sake of saying you tracked your dog. You would soon learn to dislike the sport you started out loving.

If your memory is not as sharp as it once was, keep a journal of your training days so you know the exact yardage used on the last track you gave your dog, how old it was, how many turns it had, what direction the turns were in, what obstacles, if any, your dog had to deal with, and the weather conditions that day. Your training log should spell out what your dog did at each point along the track. Don't count on a somewhat unreliable memory to supply you with all the details when you go out to train a week later.

Don't let your nerves on the day of a tracking test keep you from eating a good breakfast and drinking a sufficient amount of fluids. A lightheaded handler, weak in the knees and unsteady on her feet, is not in the dog's best interest. Remember that this is a non-competitive sport. You do not need speed to finish the track and earn your title.

Especially take time at the starting stake, or back at the car, to untangle your tracking line completely. Do not try to untangle it while you are following behind your tracking dog. You may fall because you are not watching where you are walking, or you may fail to see an article or turn indication because your eyes were on the lead instead of on the dog. Either mistake could be a disastrous one. Always know where the lead is. It can sometimes wrap around your legs while the dog is searching for an article or a turn. Be sure the lead is clear before you allow the dog to resume tracking.

Lastly, remember that after a long day of tracking, whether it was just a training day or a day at an actual tracking test, you have been outside all day, have very likely been exposed to too much sun, and are probably overly tired. If it was a tracking test, you were a little excited, a little nervous, and had a little too much adrenaline flowing for most of the day. All of this can be a dangerous combination for an individual that now has a long drive home. Please take precautions to not fall asleep at the wheel. Bring a spouse, a friend, or anyone you can think of to talk to you and keep you company on the drive home. Don't be afraid to pull over to the side of the road and take a nap.

Tracking is an incredible sport and I would never want to see you or your dog hurt by it. Be safe. Take reasonable precautions. Make it fun for yourself as well as the dog, and it will be a sport you will enjoy well into your senior years.