

Nosework With a Lapphund

By Connie Burnet

In January 2014, when my Finnish Lapphund Alex was a year old, we started in Nosework classes at a local training center. Eleven months later, I'm hooked on Nosework and Alex is too!

1. What Is Nosework?

Nosework is scent detection. It's not much different from the training that Search and Rescue dogs get, or bomb/drug detection dogs. In Nosework, the dog is searching for concealed "hides" that are "odor straws"-- Q-tips scented with an essential oil and stuck into a plastic drinking straw to protect them from the environment. The essential oils of Birch, Anise, Clove, and a few others like Lemongrass, are used because they are distinctive odors and not ones that a dog will typically encounter in its normal environment.

2. How is it taught?

Obviously, dogs don't need to be taught how to use their noses. In fact, they could teach US, if only we had the olfactory abilities they do! However, they need to be taught how to search, and the handler needs to be taught how to read the dog and to know when the dog is alerting to a hide he has found.

We started by getting the dogs to search through cardboard boxes scattered on the floor, with one box holding a food treat. The basis of every search is the dog's hunting instinct, and the hunt is always about providing food. So food treats are a part of Nosework training at every level, and even handlers with very advanced dogs train with food and odor, and rarely with odor alone.

Once the dogs grasped the idea that they were to seek out the box with food in it and they could eat the food, we started making the food inaccessible to the dog: we put a top on the box, or closed it. The dog would then find the box with food and let us know, through whatever body language it employed, and we would open the box and let the dog have the food. From there, we moved to not letting the dog eat the food in the box, but giving him a food reward from our hand. Then we hid the food in locations around the room and encouraged the dog to search for it, expanding its concept of 'search' from just boxes to the environment in general.

After six weeks of that, we started on odor. Birch is the first odor used in NACSW trials. Our instructor "paired" food treats with birch odor straws and the dogs searched for the hide and were rewarded with high-value treats from the handlers when they found the hides and told us where they were. In a typical search, there might be three hides in a room. The dog would be treated for each find, and the treat would be given at the site of the hide, so that the odor would be in the dog's nose as he got the treat – this helped them associate the find with the reward.

3. Where do they search?

There are four types of searches in Nosework:

Interior – hide can be anywhere on a piece of furniture or in the furnishings of a room;

Exterior – hide can be on the exterior of a building, or can be in the grass or shrubbery in a designated area;

Vehicle – hide will be on the exterior of one or more cars, trucks, or other vehicles;

Container – hide is inside a box or other form of package, in a designated area.

There are quite a few factors that come into play; for example, the Exterior and Vehicle searches take place outdoors, where wind and weather conditions affect the odor and how it travels, pools, diffuses, or doesn't. There are also many distractions outdoors. One day Alex had just started a Vehicle search when from a pen on the next property, a goat and its kid came trotting out and started towards us. Alex had to switch quickly from Nosework dog to Herding dog, as he directed the goats back into their pen!

Our searches got more challenging as the dogs grew more proficient. Hides would be suspended on strings so that they dangled three feet or more above the floor, to encourage a dog to look UP and not just scour the floor for scents. Hides would be concealed in agility equipment, and Alex scrambled up onto pause tables, stuck his head through folded ring-gates, and wedged his furry self behind the A-frame to find what was back there. Outdoors, hides were put in areas that were 'potty' areas for dogs at other times, and I learned how to tell that my boy was about to lift his leg, and how to whisk him away before he did. (Marking or relieving themselves in a trial is an immediate disqualification for the dog.)

4. How do they compete?

Before a dog can enter a Nosework trial in NACSW, that dog must first take and pass an Odor Recognition Test (ORT) for the oil it will be searching in the trial (Birch for Level One, Anise for Level Two, Clove for Level Three). This is to keep the trials from being filled with dogs that are not able to detect the subject odor in trial conditions.

In the ORT, which Alex and I took in September, the dog and handler are escorted to a room that is set aside for the test. There are a dozen identical white cardboard boxes on the floor. In one of the boxes is a Birch odor straw. The dog/handler team has three minutes; in that time, the dog must locate the Birch straw and indicate its find to the handler, who must then call 'alert' to the NACSW judge. If the alert is correct, the dog passed the test. If it is not correct, the dog did not pass.

Alex and I went into the ORT room and walked up the first row of six boxes; he sniffed at each one, but did not stop. We turned and walked down the second row of six boxes, with the same result. I restarted him on the first row, and this time he stopped at the fourth box in that row. He nosed at it twice, tried to get his nose underneath it, smacked at the top of it with his paw, and then stood with his paw on the box, looking up at me. I said "Alert!" to the judge, who said "Yes!" and I treated Alex at the site of the hide. Success!

Now that Alex has passed Birch ORT, he is eligible to compete in NW1 trials. However, the trials are far more difficult than the ORT: in NACSW, he has to successfully pass all four searches (interior, exterior,

vehicle, and container) at the same trial. The environment will most likely be some place he has never been before, and the distractions will be plentiful and powerful. I plan to practice a lot more before we go for NW1! Classes and fun matches help me learn how to read my dog, and help my dog learn how to keep searching even through distractions.

5. Lapphunds and Nosework

My instructor had never met a Lapphund or worked with one before Alex and I came into her Nosework class. She is one of Alex's biggest supporters and now has great admiration for the breed. She remarked that Alex's search style is that of a hunting dog, and since Lapphunds were hunting dogs before they became herders of reindeer, that's understandable. When Alex catches odor and starts tracing it to source, his snuffling can be heard through the pole barn where our class is held. He searches methodically and starts with the perimeter, and he seems to view the search as work, rather than a game of some sort. He has an excellent work ethic and style!

Almost all dogs enjoy Nosework and are good at it. It helps shy dogs gain confidence, and it helps young and immature dogs learn to concentrate and work. Based on what I've seen with my Alex, I think Lapphunds are especially suited to this, as it includes investigation, exploration, food treats, and work with their person – all things dear to the heart of a Lappy. I hope we meet more Lapphunds in our Nosework adventures in the future!



Here is Alex (Sugarok's Fashion Designer) at a Nosework class, searching a horse trailer. You can see the odor straw he's located. He noses it, turns to me, and gets a treat at the site of the hide.