Aimee Hurt and Wicket

Nose on the Ground—
A Day in the Life of a Dog Handler

by Teresa Jenson, Des Moines Founders GC, Zone XI

Late May in the Midwest is the time when woodland wildflowers are beginning to wane, while prairie plants are preparing for their growth spurt. Helping to ensure the sustainability of habitats such as these, Working Dogs for Conservation trains "unadoptable" dogs to use their keen sense of smell in protecting specific wild places. For three years two dogs, Wicket and Lily, were trained to detect invasive birdsfoot trefoil (*Lespedeza cuneata*) at the Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge in Prairie City, IA. In 2015, a grant from the GCA's Partners for Plants in conjunction with a Des Moines Founders Garden Club project led to the enlisting of another dog, Busco. The plant search was also expanded to include whorled milkweed (*Asclepias verticillata*), a host for the monarch butterfly.

Aimee Hurt, trainer, handler, and director of operations at Working Dogs for Conservation, sat down with members of Des Moines Founders GC to discuss the Iowa project. **How are dogs identified as good candidates for this type of training?** We network with animal rescue shelters nationwide through an organization called 2 The Rescue. Its staff identifies dogs for qualities called "'high drive," meaning energetic, reward-driven, and able to bond with trainers. Typically, those who qualify are of the herding mix, and are trained between ages one and three. **What size area do you cover in a day, and how do you work?** The most we have covered in a day is 14 km. The dogs will walk/run up to four times as far as the handlers, making S turns over parallel lined paths 20 to 30 meters apart. The dogs sit to indicate the desired plant. We give them their toy and make notes. An 80-plant day can be very busy! **What is the process for sensitizing dogs to the materials you are trying to find?** When we are sensitizing dogs to a new plant, we create a lineup of 5 containers with a different plant in each. Leaves are crushed to create a more pungent smell. When the dogs sniff and pay attention to the correct container, we again reward them. We then expand the training from the simpler sensory environment of, say, a parking lot to much more complex natural areas. **Specifically, how has the Partners for Plants grant furthered your work?** Your support allowed us to be the first known project in the world to use trained dogs to search simultaneously for a weed *and* a desired plant. The funding allowed for a more thorough search, too, past a piece of land's perimeter, deep into the tall-grass prairie. Garden club members will be assisting the refuge staff in assessing newly found milkweed patches. We thank you for making all of this possible.