



Water Issues

By Rosemary Janoch

From time to time, readers will suggest a topic for me to discuss and the topic in this issue is due to an inquiry from a Canadian tracking friend, Marcia Halliday, who asked what she might expect in the way of water difficulties while training her current TDX hopeful. The idea caught me off guard since I have never really given the topic much thought. Well, thanks to Marcia, I will address the topic of water in three stages: water as an obstacle; water as a weather consideration; and drinking water.

When teaching a tracking dog to deal with a water obstacle, keep in mind that there are many types of water. There is still or stagnant water which you should be careful to not let your dog drink from. There is running water that will move the scent downstream from any crossing you made. There are ponds which come with a variety of distractions including frogs that hop into the water as your dog passes by, water snakes that slither here and there, waterfowl that honk, land, take off, and may even swim inquisitively toward you and your dog, and the ever popular issue of goose poop which dogs apparently regard as a delicacy. There are rain puddles which can range from quite small and easy for you and your dog to splash through to quite large and intimidating enough that your dog will try to go around it rather than through it.

When teaching a dog to cross a water obstacle such as a stream, teach it the same way you would teach any other TDX obstacle the dog would need to cross. Start with a straight on approach so that the crossing is done at a 90 degree angle with a food reward or an article reward placed shortly after the crossing. The approach can be slightly angled for the next lesson and

then at a more extreme angle for the dog that needs to be challenged. To prevent your dog from simply blasting across any stream he sees, occasionally head straight for a stream and then make a turn just before it. Be sure to turn right one time and left the next time to prevent your dog from becoming pattern trained. For the same reason, you should cross the stream and immediately put a turn after the crossing also. Again be sure to turn both to the left and the right. For an extra challenge, find a stream deep in the woods and let your dog work with two problems at the same time.

When handling a stream crossing you should wait for the dog to commit to the track on the far side of the stream before moving forward yourself. I learned this lesson back in the old days when barbed wire fences were common and having a TDX track go through one was almost expected. Managing one of those three strand fences is quite an issue so I was told to always get my dog safely through to the other side if he indicated he wanted to search there. I would then handle my line from one side of the fence while my dog searched on the other side of the fence. When I saw him give me that wonderful “head snap” and begin to pull into his harness I would give my “wait” command and work my way through the fence to get on his side. Then we would move on together. I would do the same thing at a stream crossing. After letting my dog go to the other side I would wait to see if he found the track before crossing the stream myself. This will save you from splashing across water ankle deep to only have to come back through the stream if your dog doesn’t find the track on the other side. It also allows you to use your “wait” command so that you can negotiate the stream and slippery rocks safely without having the dog pull you off balance.



Photo 1: If you teach your dog to track directly through a puddle rather than skirting around the edge of it, you lessen the probability of missing an article on the track.

Dogs should be taught to go directly through a large puddle if the track goes through the puddle. Do not allow the dog to go around it and here's a reason why. Judges often lay tracks with the idea that articles should be easy to find. If they are putting an article in the woods, for instance, they might look for a small clearing to drop the article. If vegetation is heavy, a dry creek bed makes a great spot to drop an article since the dog and handler are unlikely to miss it. If rain moves in that night, however, the article might now be placed in or near a significant puddle. Letting your dog run around one side of the puddle or the other just might cause you to fail to find an article. You don't need a dry stream bed either, as I have seen puddles in an open field eight or ten feet in width after a heavy rain. If you permit your dog to go around it, you are gambling that there is no article directly on the other side. I hate to gamble so I train the issue instead. In training put an article on the far edge of the puddle and shorten up your lead so the dog doesn't have the option of going around. Praise and reward your dog for going through it. Now partially submerge the article and repeat the training exercise. Praise and reward again. Finally, prepare your dog for the worse case scenario where the article is actually hidden in the puddle of water. Yes, your dog can do this. Cadaver dogs find bodies under water all the time and some of those bodies are quite deep. You are only asking your dog to find a wallet or glove at the bottom of a two inch deep puddle. Trust me on this...your dog *can* do it.



Photo 2: Prepare yourself for tracking in the rain by having the proper gear which might include a hooded Gore-Tex jacket, water proof boots, a pair of Sealskinz gloves and Rite-in-the-Rain paper for drawing your map.

When training water obstacles you need to keep safety and common sense in mind. I once put in a winter track for my TDX trainee through a frozen marshy area where I thought the cattails sticking up through the snow would be an interesting scenting challenge for him. When I

returned three hours later to run the track, my dog walked on top of the frozen surface but the morning sun had warmed it enough that it would no longer hold my weight. When my leg went into ice cold water up to my knee, I hastily called my dog back to me and got out of there.

If you are working a VST dog, lay tracks around water retention ponds as these are frequently found in business parks and present you with an opportunity to work around geese and the highly prized goose poop. Be sure to walk along the raised dikes that surround many of those ponds.

Now let's deal with the topic of water as a weather issue. Track on a foggy day when the scent of the track is widely dispersed and seems to hang in the air. Try to keep your dog close to the track in foggy conditions and teach him to not be distracted by the air scenting opportunities. Keep the quartering to a minimum. Track early in the day so that your dog is well acquainted with dew. Then be sure he can track later in the day when there is no dew at all.

Tracking in the rain has never been a favorite pastime of mine but for those of you that want to increase your chances of passing at a test, you and your dog need to be prepared for rain. If you find your dog simply stands there in his harness and refuses to track in the rain you should solve the problem like you would solve an article problem. Remove the issue from the tracking field and solve it elsewhere. I would start by simply walking him in the rain and let him do his business outside. If he really hates the rain you might be out there for quite some time so be sure you are dressed appropriately. Put your rain gear on and try to enjoy the exercise while you wait him out. When your dog will finally do his business in the rain without complaint, you should try to get a "work ethic" going with your dog. Ask your dog to perform some simple obedience exercises like heeling, retrieving a dumbbell, or doing a sit stay. When your dog can do simple obedience exercises outside in the rain it is time to move back to the tracking field and lay a simple track in a light drizzle to see if your dog will now track for you. If yes, try a heavier rain the next time the opportunity presents itself. If no, then increase the work ethic at home with more challenging obedience exercises like a drop on recall in the rain or utility hand signals. Keep safety in mind when working in the rain, however, and never be out there in lightning or extreme wind.

Lastly I would like to address drinking water. Most trackers know that fresh water should be offered to the dog before and after a track. If needed, water can be offered to the dog *during* the track as well but be sure that giving the dog water has been practiced during your training tracks. While training your TDX or VST dog give him the opportunity to take a sip of water when he stops to indicate an article. Even a TD dog on much shorter and fresher tracks should be given the chance to drink water during a few of his training tracks. If the day of the test happens to be hot and dry you can now be confident that offering your dog water during the track will not confuse him or distract him. Don't allow your dog to water himself during a track, however, by drinking from a pond or stagnant puddle. It would be better to stop your tracking and offer him fresh drinking water from your bag.

Stopping for a drink of water can also be used to permit the dog to have a short mental break when you see he is struggling with the track. Stopping the dog's movement, putting him into a sit, getting your bowl and water out of your bag, pouring him a drink, letting him take a lap or two, emptying the bowl and putting it back into your bag, and then finally giving your dog the command to "go find" just gave your dog five minutes to relax and take a mental time out. You would be surprised to learn how much this helps a dog to refocus on the task at hand.

Water can be poured on the dog before or after tracking to cool him off. It is most effective if you get the water on his tummy and on the inside of his back legs.

Plain drinking water can also be used to help a beginning VST dog find his track on a hard surface. Bring a spray bottle when laying a VST track and when you are on a long stretch of asphalt or concrete stop every few steps, spray the water on the ground ahead of you and just walk through it. If you want to give your beginner dog even more help bend over and put a hand print in the water. Continue putting more footprints or hand prints in the water as you walk across the non-vegetated surface. An experienced VST dog doesn't need this, of course, but I have found it helps a beginner. The water might be gone by the time you run the track but the little hand prints and footprints will still be there. Spray bottles of water can also be used to give water to your dog but be sure he is accustomed to this method, rather than drinking from a bowl, before you use it on a track.

I would like to leave you with one final thought while I am on this topic of water. You should remember that scent itself behaves very much like water. It will flow downhill when you lay a track on the side of a hill. It will pool in small depressions which is why some dogs struggle with ditches and ravines and why many VST dogs are drawn to storm sewers and drains. If you see your dog struggling on a track ask yourself...what would water do?...and you may understand the problem your dog is working out.