



Training Bloodhounds in KENYA

BY LINDA PORTER

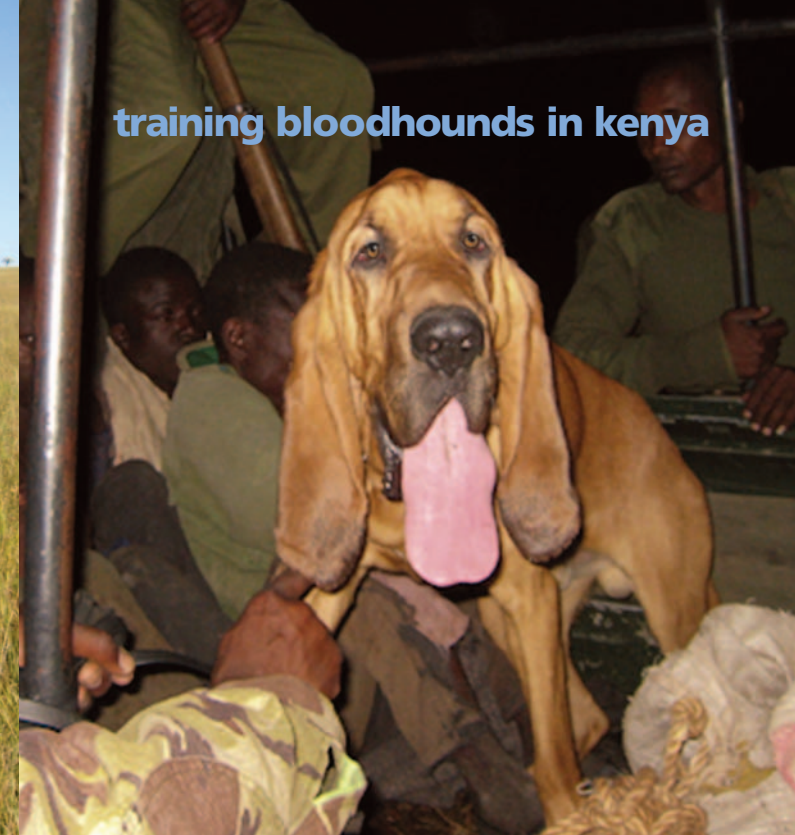
Two dog trainers and former law-enforcement officers find challenging tracking conditions in the African bush.

I STARED OUT THE BACK of our Land Rover, watching the iron gates embedded with bullets disappear in the dust as we drove down the dirt road leading away from what had been our sanctuary for most of the summer of 2009. As our driver slowed, I turned and watched as a huge bull elephant passed slowly in front of our vehicle, flapping its ears and eyeing us cautiously. As we drove on, my mind drifted back to the beginning of our adventure.

My husband, John Lutenberg, and I own and operate a tracking and trailing dog school in Cañon City, Colorado, where we specialize in training Bloodhounds. Our time in Kenya started with an e-mailed request for help from a continent away. The e-mail, from the Mara Conservancy read, "We are looking for someone to help us purchase and train Bloodhound tracker dogs for our anti-poaching unit in Kenya." I e-mailed a response and received a reply almost

■ **Left:** The authors and trainees: standing (*left to right*) Naiyoma, Kip Rono, Linda Porter, Sabaya, John Lutenberg, Meseto, and James; kneeling (*left to right*) Mohamed, Robert, and Siele, with K-9s Morani and Memusi. **Above:** A herd of Cape buffalo in the Masai Mara Game Reserve.





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■ Above left and above: Training on the tall grass plains was dangerous at times due to the many obstacles and animal hidden in the vegetation. Above far right: Dogs and handlers pile into the truck to hunt poachers at night.

immediately from a woman named Asuka, a veterinarian employed by the Conservancy. She was looking for trailing dogs that could be trained to help their ranger unit track poachers in Mara Triangle, a 510-square-kilometer wildlife reserve within Masai Mara Game Reserve. After trying for three years to acquire puppies from a Kenyan breeder without success, they had expanded their search to the United States.

Although we routinely receive e-mails about trailing and tracking training, rarely does an overseas inquiry come to fruition. Little did we know that this was the start of a compelling adventure and the training experience of a lifetime.

The Journey Begins

The Mara Conservancy had a shoestring budget and was trying to fund the project with donations. As avid supporters of wildlife, John and I decided to support their efforts by donating our time to train the Bloodhounds at our home in Colorado for five months. Then we would take the dogs to Kenya to train the handlers in their own environment. It was an excellent opportunity for us to gain experience with training in another culture and in a totally different environment. The Mara Conservancy agreed to pay for our travel expenses, accommodations, and food. It seemed like a win-win situation for all concerned.

We purchased two, 16-week-old male Bloodhounds from

good working lines and began training them in January 2009. We planned to travel to Kenya at the end of May.

From photographs of the Mara Conservancy, we developed an idea of the terrain the dogs would be working in. We used a combination of food tracks and scent trails to start the pups' training, giving them experience in scent work and ground disturbance. As the dogs progressed in basic trailing skills, we focused on rural terrain training trails with as many animal distractions as we could find. We combined that training with hard-surface work. We worked and trained the dogs five to six days per week from January to the end of May, making sure they had a solid foundation before arriving in Kenya to start the handler training. We trained the dogs to pick up a trail from a simple foot track, knowing that would be the main scent source available to the handlers and dogs during a poaching deployment. We also trained using various scent items. As the dogs advanced, we added cross and split trails to the regimen to introduce some scent-discrimination training. Armed with a little information from the Mara Conservancy, we fine-tuned the training by having our trail layers emulate poacher behaviors and capture and evasion techniques while laying trails.

As our departure date approached, the details of shipping the dogs to Kenya became a paperwork nightmare. We had

to hire a pet shipper, and the dogs were not allowed to fly passenger cargo into Kenya — rather, they had to be shipped air freight cargo. As the dogs grew, so did the crate size and shipping costs. This was the most complicated and costly part of the project. The Mara Conservancy was good to work with and helped us handle the difficulties that arose.

When the day arrived, we took the dogs to Denver to be shipped. Air travel to Nairobi normally takes 24 hours. However, dogs require two days with a stopover in Frankfurt, Germany, to be watered, fed, and removed from their crates for an overnight stay. Upon arrival in Nairobi, amazingly, the hounds were in good condition. Because the dogs arrived on a Saturday, however, we had difficulties with the inspection. After three grueling hours of immigration and vet inspections, the dogs were released into the custody of the Mara Conservancy, and we were able to head toward our final destination.

Extreme Tracking

With dogs and luggage piled into a small private aircraft, we flew from Nairobi to the Mara Triangle. From there, we traveled by Land Rover across the reserve to a remote ranger outpost called Ngirō-are, located one kilometer from the Tanzanian border in the farthest corner of the reserve. That is where the dogs would be stationed. Most of the poaching activity the rangers encountered took place along the border between Tanzania and Kenya. We were to work with the rangers for four weeks.

It was an excellent opportunity for us to gain experience with training in another culture and in a totally different environment.



As we drove along the rocky dirt road to the outpost, we began to understand the environmental conditions and training challenges that awaited us in the coming weeks. The climate was slightly humid but very tolerable with temperatures fluctuating between 60°F at night to 85°F during the day. As we drove, we could see large thickets full of twisted brush, trees, and varieties of thorny vines. Beautiful acacia trees full of colorful birds dotted the landscape. We passed herds of elephants, cape buffalo, giraffes, topi, zebras, lions, cheetahs, hyenas, ostriches, and many more varieties of wildlife. We spotted crocodiles and hippos lounging along the river's edge, while an occasional cobra or black mamba slithered across the road and disappeared into the chest-high grass. The reality of our situation slowly began creep into our minds. "How could we possibly train in this environment, on foot, and running behind a dog on a 30-foot lead?" By the time we

reached the outpost at the edge of the park, we were literally stunned by what we were facing. If there was ever a time to label a situation "extreme tracking," this was it.

The outpost sat at the bottom of a steep escarpment and was surrounded on the other three sides by swamp and low, rolling grasslands. The 15-foot-tall iron gates of the outpost had bullets embedded in them, and the entire outpost was surrounded by three-foot-thick stone walls. Two corners of the enclosure had lookout towers for a topside view of the surrounding landscape. It was a virtual fortress, complete with ranger housing, a crude cookhouse, and a small cinder-block hut that was used for daily meetings. The rangers

PHOTOGRAPHER: LINDA PORTER



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and runs with thick cement flooring, large metal interior and exterior doors, and doubled chain link wiring. The reason for the overkill construction would become apparent later.

Twice a day for the first week we ventured outside the station with the senior rangers and trainees and ran short trails with the dogs, showing the trainees how the dogs worked. We required an armed ranger to run with the trail layer and one to run with the dog team to watch for dangerous animals that might be hiding in the tall grass.

The trailing conditions for the dogs were great: moist, lush grasslands as far as the eye could see. The hounds worked trails through the chest-high vegetation at full speed, making it difficult to keep in step with them. Compared to our sure-footed Kenyan friends, who ran trails in sandals or flat-soled tennis shoes, we were slow and clumsy in the bush for the first week. Running for any distance in the chest-high grass was like running in water for us. Our feet caught on dead underbrush and sticky vines. We tripped over termite mounds, hidden rocks, and elephant dung, and fell waist deep into warthog holes. Grasshoppers the size of hummingbirds landed on our clothing and stuck like glue as we tried to brush them off. Huge army ants marched across the ground in long, thick, black trails.

At the end of each day, our muscles ached from running.

explained that the bullets imbedded in the gates were from a shootout with bandits and cattle rustlers that lived in some of the nearby villages.

We were welcomed with warm handshakes, enthusiastic smiles, and a marching demonstration from our new trainees. Our housing for the next month was a sturdy, comfortable tent pitched near the cook house, complete with real beds — and monkeys that visited us during the breakfast hour hoping for a handout.

Initial Handler Training

The Mara Conservancy had chosen eight men from local villages for the K-9 trainee positions. None of the trainees had prior ranger experience. Three of them spoke English, one spoke several different tribal languages, and the others spoke only Swahili. Through our initial correspondence with the Mara Conservancy, we had been expecting to work with four fully trained English-speaking rangers for two rotating K-9 positions. When we learned there were eight men to train, we became concerned that the choice and number of trainees would further complicate our training schedule. The language barrier would obviously impede the training process. None of the trainees had any firearms or tactical experience, and none had ever worked with dogs. We had one month to train eight inexperienced men to handle two green dogs for

We soon learned how capable, resourceful, resilient, and motivated these men were.



■ **Above left:** The trainees attended classes in handling, scent theory, trail setup and marking, reading the dog, and environmental impact, as well as K-9 health, first aid, and grooming. **Above right:** The trainees learn basic tracking procedures.

poaching enforcement. However, we soon learned how capable, resourceful, resilient, and motivated these men were.

The first week, we held classroom presentations using a laptop computer powered by solar electricity. We covered basic line handling, scent theory, training techniques, reading the dog, environmental impact on trails, and how to set up and mark training trails.

Asuka, the veterinarian, held classes on K-9 nutrition, grooming, kennel maintenance, and basic first aid, and taught the trainees how to fill out a daily health record for each dog. All the lessons had to be translated into Swahili by the K-9 unit team leader. The trainees' hung on every word that was spoken and asked questions in Swahili or broken English. Apart from the classroom lessons, we encouraged the trainees to spend time each day feeding and grooming the dogs, learning how to approach and praise them.

We were impressed by the construction of the Mara Conservancy's kennels. The Kenyan carpenters had built a dog fortress inside the station: indoor-outdoor doghouses

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■ Above: K-9 Unit Leader Olongui Sabaya Shadrack with K-9 Morani.

We had excruciating itchy bites on our ankles from nasty pinhead-sized insects called pepper ticks that no repellent could prevent. After suffering an allergic reaction to insect bites, I began to duct-tape my pant legs to my boots. That resulted in some odd looks from the trainees and rangers, who laughed at my desperate efforts to keep the bugs out. It was exhausting work both mentally and physically in the rough, unfamiliar terrain.

In addition, we soon learned that we faced more urgent training and environmental issues. The grass was so high that the trainees had trouble seeing the dogs ahead of them on a 20-foot line. Consequently, it was difficult to learn to read the dog's body language, which is a critical skill all handlers must learn in order to work the dog effectively. With only two dogs for eight men, it was challenging for each trainee to get the line time required to learn the skills without exhausting the dogs.

To resolve those problems, we split the men into two teams of four and assigned each group to one dog. The trainees were to remain with the same dog throughout training process. To solve the line-time problem, we always took two handlers on one trail, switching them out halfway through the track.

After working the dogs, the trainees continued to train each day during K-9 downtime on what we call line drills. We placed them in teams of two and had them clip the line to each other so they could get the feel of how to work a line when there was movement on the other end. Those drills helped the trainees immensely with their line skills

and coordination without having to expose the dogs to unnecessary pulling and jerking, and kept the dogs from being overworked. To remedy the problem of being unable to read their dogs, we eventually moved to a location where the grass was shorter.

Training Around Distractions

When we thought the teams were ready, we handed over the lines. After the trainees had been working the dogs for five or six days and we were satisfied that they were able to read some K-9 body language, we used an Astro 220 K9 GPS tracking collar almost exclusively to assist us in running unmarked tracks over long distances. The apparatus included two tracking collars and a handheld reader unit designed to allow hunting dog handlers to track their dogs remotely. We used it differently, having a tracklayer carry the collar along the trail being laid. It was simple to use and very accurate. The device mapped the exact track for us and was accurate to within five feet of trail. Thus we could still control the training session and correct errors if necessary, as well as work longer trails without using visual markers.

It was exhausting work both mentally and physically in the rough, unfamiliar terrain.



tion near the Tanzanian border where the wildlife had eaten the grass down to knee height. We were encouraged by that news but later learned that the location had other difficulties.

When we arrived at the site, we were greeted by a pride of lions that had staked out a buffalo kill and were reluctant to share the area. We drove another kilometer or so across the grassy plains and settled on a spot where the grass was considerably shorter and we could see for some distance. We were amazed by the abundance of wildlife including zebras, giraffe, topi, antelope, gazelle, eland, and mongoose. As beautiful as the animals were, they posed yet another huge training distraction for the dogs, not to mention us having to run trails on foot right through herds of wild animals. That concept didn't seem to bother the rangers, so we

Our trainees progressed faster than we expected given the difficult conditions, showing a natural ability to work the line and read the dogs' behavior. In all our years of training students, we have seldom had the privilege of working with such naturally gifted and motivated individuals.

Then it was time to move to a new training location. We asked to be taken to an area that had shorter grass, where the trainees could see the dogs better and could run longer, more complicated trails. The sergeant assured us that he knew of a good loca-

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trusted their experience and got busy training.

We ran short training trails that incorporated the wildlife distractions — right through herds of darting zebra, topi and antelope. After half a day the dogs became disinterested in the animals and stayed locked onto the human scent trails.

Training in the shorter grass around herd animals had its advantages, but those areas also attracted large predators. One day we sent an armed ranger and two tracklayers out to lay a mile-long trail. Scanning the horizon, I noticed an animal sitting on a low mound of dirt about a quarter mile upwind from the tracklayers' position. I immediately asked Mohammed whether it was a lion. "Yes, that is a Simba," he replied. I asked whether he thought it was a problem for our tracklayers. He said, "No, because the ranger sees him."

Within the next five minutes, to my horror, I saw six more lions appear. They sat facing our tracklayers, their noses sniffing the air and smelling the human scent on the wind. I grabbed the radio and shouted into the mic that there where now seven lions and asked whether the tracklayers had seen them. The sergeant calmly responded that they saw the lions and that it was safe to run the trail. He said the lions were not a danger to them "right now." Mohammad radioed Asuka and had her drive slowly toward the lions, moving our car between the field team and the pride. As we started the dog on the trail, the lions slowly retreated, disappearing into the grass like ghosts on the wind. By the time we reached the tracklayers, the lions were gone. After that experience, I did not question the ranger's judgment again.

Wildlife Challenges

Lions where were not the only predators we had to deal with. The dog kennel was located inside the 15-foot-high walls of the outpost and sturdily built for a reason. One night during a storm we were awakened by the sound of baying and whining hounds. Our tent was close to the kennel, so I grabbed my flashlight and ran outside in the pouring rain to see what the problem was.

When I reached the kennel, I noticed that one of the interior doghouse doors had swung shut in the wind. I opened the large metal door so the dog could get inside and then, without a further thought, ran back to the tent to dry off and get back to sleep. The howling and desperate whining continued. A short time later, we heard one of the trainees checking the dogs. After that, we heard no more sounds from the dogs for the rest of the night. In the morning, we asked the men what they had done to quiet the dogs. They advised us that when Mohammad had gone to check the dogs, he noticed the shadow of a leopard pacing along the top of the wall next to the kennel roof. He locked the dogs in their houses behind the heavy steel dog doors so there would be no problems from the leopard. I learned to always look up after that night.

Other hazards existed on the trail. One morning we went to a location where the grass was head-high. As usual, the rangers patrolled the training area with our vehicle to clear



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■ **Above and right:** A poacher's cache of meat, spread on leaves to dry. The meat is sold for cash or used to feed the poachers' families.

Life for the Mara predators had been renewed with the great migration in full swing.



landscape had literally been transformed — it was blanketed by migrating wildebeest and zebra. The chest-high grass that had hidden its hazards and inhabitants so well was now gone, eaten by the herds of migrating animals. We could now see the bare, rocky ground and, thankfully, the warthog holes, dead tree limbs, and rocks that had left us face down on the ground so many times before. Smaller creatures such as snakes, warthogs, and mongoose that had gone unnoticed were now easily spotted. Wilde-beest and zebra filled every corner of what used to be tall grasslands stretching to the Serengeti border and beyond. We drove by a pride of lions lounging on their backs beneath a shady acacia tree, their bellies fat and their appetites satisfied from the plentiful food sources.

Life for the Mara predators had been renewed with the great migration in full swing. It was the peak of poaching season. Along with the great migration came record numbers of poachers with thousands of deadly snares, spears, and bows and arrows. The new dog handlers were a little overwhelmed and not yet comfortable with the daunting task of conducting actual K-9 deployments, so we returned to Africa to assist them.

At first we focused on remedial training. Within a few days, we left for the Tanzania border with one dog, four handlers, and an entourage of rangers, and began searching for poachers and snares. As we drove along the bottom of the escarpment, we could see poachers midway up the hill. We stopped and began scouting the area for snares. The rangers were experts at spotting the thin wire snares hanging in the brush. We could hear poachers on the hill yelling at us to leave the snares alone. They were too far away to chase, and they had an advantage. They were armed with long handmade metal spears and bows and arrows that they



could easily throw or shoot at us from their position on the hill, and they were deadly accurate with those weapons. We turned our attention back to collecting as many snares as possible. We kept up our patrol and collected snares daily, releasing live trapped animals and hoping for a chance to track some poachers. That opportunity came late one afternoon less than a week later.

We were heading in from our patrol duties when a call came over the radio in Swahili. Our translator said that a tourist in the game reserve had spotted some men running on foot into a heavy thicket about 5 kilometers from our location. We drove at breakneck speed over the rough terrain and arrived within minutes. The rangers went into the thicket before the dogs and handlers to try to flush the poachers out. Thirty minutes later, we heard yelling and gunfire coming from the thicket. We received a radio report that the rangers had captured four poachers in the thicket and that three others were on the run.

We went to a location where a ranger said he'd seen poachers running into the brush. Upon arrival, we realized that a group of rangers from another station had run through the area, thus contaminating any tracks we could have followed with a dog. Feeling a little frustrated by the situation we received another radio call from the Mara Conservancy CEO. He requested a dog team for a different location. We could only understand a few words of Swahili but recognized the urgency in his voice. He had seen a poacher running through the brush.

When we arrived at the CEO's location, once again we found that anxious rangers had contaminated the site, making it impossible for a dog to track. While we waited for another chance, the perimeter teams caught two more poachers running through a thicket opposite our location.

It was growing darker by the minute, and the team was still missing one suspect. We decided to start a dog on some possible poachers' foot tracks we'd found by the edge of a thicket. The dog followed the track for a half-mile around the brush without results. As darkness fell and the cool night air settled in, we ventured into the center of the

PHOTOGRAPHER: LINDA PORTER

thicket on foot to look for the poachers' camp.

As we walked deeper into the thicket the ground became squashy and sticky under our feet. The smell of death caught in my nose and made me feel nauseated. I shone my flashlight on the ground to see what was causing the strange transformation of the terrain underfoot and the awful smell. I realized I was walking on top of rows of half-dried animal meat laid out on top of fresh leaves.

As I shone my light around, I saw freshly carved up carcasses of zebra, wildebeest, and warthog hanging from branches and scattered on the ground. We found backpacks made of goatskin, packed with the meat of the freshly slaughtered animals. The dog was leery of the smell and hesitant to move between the carcasses. Because it was dark, the rangers decided it would be prudent to leave the camp and return in daylight to search for evidence and burn the remaining meat. We wholeheartedly agreed. We could hear the hyenas and who knows what else moving toward our location for a free meal and definitely didn't want to be part of that action.

In the hours that followed, we briefed handlers and rangers on proper K-9 tracking protocol, the importance of keeping areas as free from contamination as possible, setting up proper perimeters, and allowing the dog teams to move in first rather than as a last resort. It is difficult to introduce

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a whole new way of capturing poachers and change the thinking and traditions of experienced bush rangers. That was not going to happen overnight. The program would take time and patience to implement properly.

Tactical Maneuvers

Over the next three days, we returned several times to the poacher camp to run training trails and acclimate the dogs to the strong smells associated with poachers and rotting carcasses. Next we focused on night ambushes. An ambush is an effective way to catch poachers at night while they are out collecting animals trapped in their snares.

It is not easy to ambush a poacher. Most poachers have spent years hunting in the bush. They are wary and evasive, they know ranger tactics, and they have a keen sense of the environment. They quickly become aware of anything out of place in the bush by listening to the animal warning sounds. Ambushing requires a lot of patience, a good knowledge of poacher practices, and the courage to walk through the bush at night without a light.

We crossed the Tanzanian border one evening just before dark in two patrol vehicles, driving to our stakeout location without any headlights and with our tail lights covered by tree branches. When we reached the ambush location, it was dark except for the full moon rising over the Serengeti plains.

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Protecting the Masai Mara

The Masai Mara Game Reserve is one of the few remaining places on earth where huge varieties of wildlife can still be viewed up close. One can see prides of lions, leopards, cheetahs, herds of elephant, rhinos, hyenas, zebras, wildebeests, giraffes, hippos, and crocodiles among many others. The Mara Conservancy struggles to maintain the delicate balance of the ecosystem while still permitting tourists to access the area. Poaching in the triangle is at an all-time low due to the diligent efforts of the park management and its rangers.

Snares used by poachers are indiscriminate and catch, kill, or maim many species of animals, large and small. Most of the poaching in the Mara Triangle is carried out by a specific native tribe, many of whom cross the border into the park from Tanzania. The poached bush meat is then sold for income or used to feed their families.

Currently, poaching eradication in the Mara Triangle consists of heavy patrol presence, ambush tactics, and daily snare collections. The introduction of tracking dogs to the anti-poaching unit will ultimately reduce the number of poachers that are able to evade capture and prosecution by running away or simply hiding. Thus far the Bloodhounds also have proven to be a powerful deterrent, and plans to expand the K-9 program are under way.

Although the concept of using tracking dogs is still new, the rangers and handlers continue to learn, train, deploy, and implement the changes necessary to make the K9 unit a success. Since June 2009, the Bloodhound teams have tracked and apprehended 17 poachers and recovered valuable property from a lodge robbery.

To read more about the Mara Game Reserve and its K-9 program, or to donate to the project, visit www.maratriangle.com.

two huge male cape buffalo stand up in the head-high grass 50 yards from the tracklayers. We could not use a radio to warn the team without risking alerting the buffalo. They were too close. This was the nightmare scenario we had been trying to avoid. Cape buffalo are extremely dangerous, especially lone bulls grazing away from a herd. "They are headed right for the buffalo!" the sergeant exclaimed. He swung his rifle off his back and was getting into firing position when John's team spotted the bulls.

I watched the scene unfold as if in slow motion. The team came to an abrupt halt. A ranger with them signaled the men to get down, be quiet, and back up slowly as he pointed his antique rifle at one of the animals. We waited, afraid to even breathe, watching them carefully

attempt their silent retreat. As the men backed away, the buffalo stood there relaxed and unmoving. The team's scent was blowing in the opposite direction and the buffalo did

it of any threats. When the area was secure, we laid out two long training tracks opposite each other. My team could see John and his team from our vantage point. I could also see

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not see or smell them. The team was able to escape and return safely to the car. We surrendered our training area that day to the buffalo.

It was rare for the rangers to miss spotting animals. But the trailing conditions were extreme, it was impossible to see all the wildlife, and some encounters were unavoidable.

When we were stationed at Ngiro-are outpost, the CEO asked whether we would run the dogs on a real poaching deployment. My husband had 35 years of experience running dogs on criminal pursuits for the Colorado Department of Corrections, and I had 13 years of K-9 law-enforcement experience. It was an opportunity to combine our training and experience and test the dogs in a real deployment situation.

It was not quite poaching season. However, the wildebeest were starting to migrate to our location, and poachers were beginning to filter into the park. We began to train for night deployments and poacher ambushes. All our combined training and experience did not completely prepare us for an actual night ambush on a poaching camp. Poachers tended to hide out in deep dark thickets to avoid detection. As the days passed, we waited for a chance to deploy. Meanwhile, the teams' confidence and skill improved and they began creating their own training scenarios. We introduced more difficult deployment

scenarios involving multiple tracks leaving an area that were typical of fleeing poachers. We also trained other rangers stationed at different locations to assist the dog teams as cover officers and perimeter control. We introduced basic tactical tracking formations to all of the rangers and trainee dog handlers.

While at the outpost we never had an opportunity to deploy. But we managed to complete the training despite difficult conditions. On graduation day there was a huge celebration. Families from local villages as well as Mara Conservancy staff celebrated the creation of the new dog unit. Eight men now had jobs and the Mara Conservancy had two working Bloodhounds.

We spent our last evening trying to identify the sounds outside our tent, a hippo munching on grass under the cover of darkness a few feet from our door and the deep echo of a lion's roar from somewhere close by. We would miss Africa and the people we had come to know and respect. John and I both enthusiastically agreed to come back for a follow-up training session in the summer of 2010.

Return to Africa

Our return to Africa came much sooner than anticipated. Six weeks later we found ourselves back in the Mara Triangle driving down the bumpy road leading to the outpost. The

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training bloodhounds in kenya



■ Above: Night tracking in the tall grass and brush was extremely dangerous.

The light from the moon silhouetted the twisted acacia trees and we watched in silence as a lone bull elephant drifted by us — a dark, silent shadow across the landscape.

We parked our Land Rover behind a heavy thicket and some of the rangers went into the bush to scout for poachers. We stayed behind with one dog and two men waiting for the rangers to flush out any poachers. We sat down on a fat log just outside the thicket and waited. Two hours passed before the silence was broken by the radio calling for us to come quickly. At that moment, we heard rangers' voices yelling in the darkness as we loaded into the car and drove frantically toward the sounds. The terrain was rough and rocky. We tore through the bushes, swerving to avoid trees and an occasional zebra or wildebeest that was dis-oriented by our headlights. When we broke out into the open, we saw chaos unfold before us. Dust was flying and armed rangers were running in every direction searching for the fleeing poachers.

It is a common tactic for poachers to stop running and drop into the tall grass. Sometimes they discard their clothing and cover themselves with mud and grass to avoid detection, making it nearly impossible for rangers to spot them. That's a perfect scenario for a K-9 deployment, but also makes it easy to run them over in a vehicle.

We continued to search in our vehicle, however, while foot patrols searched around us. In spite of what appeared to be chaos, the rangers managed to apprehend a poacher. After another 30 minutes of searching, one of the K-9 handlers, Mohammad, managed to capture another poacher. The poacher had planted his spear in the ground facing backward in the hope that his pursuer would fall on

We tore through the bushes, swerving to avoid trees and an occasional zebra or wildebeest.



it. We later recovered several handmade spears and bows and arrows, along with some snares.

The rangers advised us not to touch the arrows or spear tips. Poachers commonly cover the tips with a poisonous substance made from a combination of cobra venom and toxic plants. An accidental cut could kill a person in minutes.

The poachers that were apprehended were filthy and covered in animal blood. Their clothing was tattered and torn. They had been in the bush for days, killing and skinning animals trapped in their snares. Because the suspects were apprehended before we had the opportunity to deploy the dog, the rangers escorted the suspects on several short trails for the dogs to practice on. That training was quite useful. The poachers smelled so strongly of animal blood and adrenaline that the young, inexperienced dogs hesitated to approach them at first. We continued that training for several days, using the poachers' clothing to make trails so that the dogs could get used to the strong smells.

Although training continued, we did not have another opportunity to use the dogs on an actual deployment while my husband and I were there. As our time in Kenya again came to a close, we found ourselves headed down the dusty road winding across the Mara, back to Nairobi and home. We drove slowly, enjoying a final view of the landscape and its inhabitants, and I wondered when or if we would be able to return to this place. I hoped so. ■

Linda Porter and John Lutenberg are former law-enforcement officers and K-9 handlers who now specialize in training trailing dogs. They currently own and operate the Canine Training Academy (www.caninetrainingacademy.com), a tracking and trailing dog school for law-enforcement officers.

PHOTOGRAPHER: LINDA PORTER

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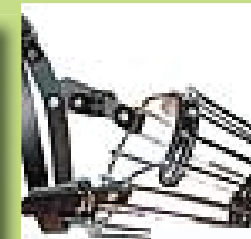
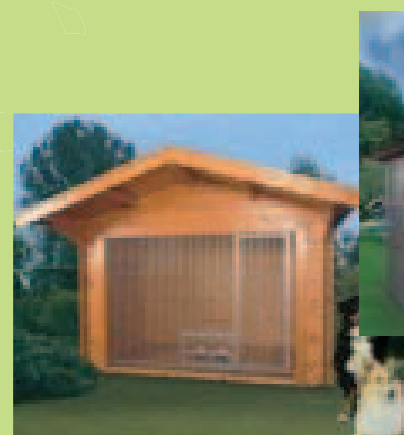
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