

# Lola to the rescue



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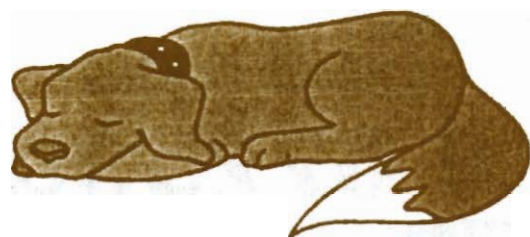
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When **Matt Creer**, team leader of Isle of Man Search and Rescue Dogs, set off with his dog, Lola, for the Lake District, a bit of Manx history was waiting to be made. Matt and Lola's aim – to become the first ever qualified Manx search and rescue dog team. Here, Matt recounts their adventure:

It usually takes around two and a half years to train a search dog, but at the time of writing Lola is not yet two years old.

She was the runt of a litter, unwanted and abandoned at an animal shelter, who came to live and train with me after being fostered by a handler from Lake District Mountain Rescue Dogs. This is the first search dog I have trained – and she is the fastest thing on four legs I have ever seen.

I'd put a huge amount of time, effort and personal expense into training throughout 2005, but Lola's general progress had been excellent and we had been working on a daily basis in the weeks running up to the trip.

We were among a group of about 90 people from across the British Isles which descended on Keswick for four days of gruelling examination as part of the National Search and Rescue Dog Association's (NSARDA) annual assessment week.

Among this number were a

mix of handlers, assessors and volunteer casualties, lovingly referred to as 'dogsbodies' or 'bodies' – people who give up their free time to hide in the hills for hours on end for the dogs to find.

For many of the handlers, myself included, this was our first experience of national assessment and it would mean the difference between success and failure for our dogs, so the pressure was on.

We arrived at the Derwentwater Youth Hostel the evening before the assessments started. There were dozens of 4x4s and estate cars parked outside. I didn't know a soul and as I entered the hostel, the atmosphere was intense, with nervous handlers everywhere.

Thankfully, I found some friends I had made on dog courses in the Lakes and Wales. We spent some time catching up, over a drink, which took our minds off the what lay ahead of us.

So how do search and rescue



dogs work?

Lola is trained to detect any human scent in the air or wind and follow that scent to the source (the casualty). Once she has found it, she will then return to me and bark. Having indicated to me that she's made a find, she then returns to the casualty, leading me to the location. She may have to repeat this sequence several times until she gets me to the casualty.

Sounds easy? Believe me, it isn't.

It is this process on which we were being assessed, with particular attention being given to the dog's indication.

The first two days were wet and windy. The wind was such that two assessors were simultaneously blown off their picnic chairs, causing much mirth amongst those of us being assessed.

Our first search of the week was a large section of mountain, predominantly crag and scree. The higher we climbed, the more difficult the terrain became, with sections of crag that had to be climbed up on all fours. Lola was pushing hard up the hill, but I was making slow progress because of the slippery wet rock and the danger of falling off the mountain.

I made it on to a scree slope, which was marginally better

under foot, so I started to traverse it. Lola was about 200 meters higher and starting to reach our top boundary. I whistled to indicate I wanted her to turn left, looked up and slipped on a wet rock. I landed hard on my side, deadening my backside and causing me to slide several metres down the scree.

After a tirade of expletives, I picked myself up in time to see Lola tearing down the mountainside towards me. Before I had time to register what had happened, she was at my feet, barking furiously, and then she was off again.

She'd found the body and I was faced with running up a wet scree slope with a dead leg and a really painful backside. I made it to the body, with lungs ready to burst, still limping, but laughing at myself and delighted Lola had done her job far better than I'd done mine.

Over the next few days, Lola and I started to flow nicely. But the final day was the big one, when assessors from NSARDA would decide if Lola and I were good enough to pass the final grading.

Our first search of the day involved a wide valley surrounded by steep sided mountains. I had to sit and wait out of sight, while an unknown number of bodies were put into



Lola indicates a find during a search and rescue exercise

position. I sat on a rock, nerves on edge, with Lola standing with me. She was making little whining noises, which she often does when she's wound up and every so often she would look at me and give a single bark.

After what seemed like forever, we were asked to commence our search. I was aware of the two assessors and two observers, very high up to my right, watching our every

move through binoculars. I took a deep breath and checked the conditions. The wind was perfect, with a strong breeze pushing down the valley towards us.

I set Lola off and she struck a scent within a few minutes. It's easy to see when she's working scent as her body language changes dramatically. Being able

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**When we at Outdoor Power & Plant were approached by Matt Creer from Isle of Man Search & Rescue Dogs we were told that they needed us to turn an old Landrover 110 from a rusty heap into a front line emergency vehicle - but they didn't have any money!**

Before we agreed to such a request we suggested a full MOT style inspection. This would determine the general health of the vehicle and whether it was a viable and economical option.

A full written report was given to Matt and we advised him on the best way forward. The vehicle was worth repairing but needed a lot of attention. As we were a small new business ourselves, we were well aware how difficult it is getting started. No one knows who you are and they are not prepared to give you credit. We agreed to help this new and invaluable charity as much as we could. What use is a search & rescue team without wheels?

A full safety inspection was undertaken starting with a brake performance test. This would measure each wheel individually for binding, ovality and total brake force. The print out showed that there were some serious issues with the rear brakes.

We then checked the headlights for alignment and the operation of all the lights, wipers and horn. All light lenses were checked for cracks, holes and poor fitment.

We then checked all the instruments inside for operation & illumination also checking the demister/blower, gauges, door handles and window regulators. Also the seat fitment and seat belts were checked for security and operation.

The Landrover was then put on the ramp. Bodywork, doors, door hinges, wheels and tyres were all checked for legality and safety.

The engine was in a good state of repair but the cam and pump belt had perished and were in need of re-timing and belt replacement. Apart from that, just a good service would do.

The oils in the transmission and differentials were all changed. Due to the grey sludge that came out of them we would assume that they had not been changed for a while.

Good suspension on any off road vehicle is crucial as it does take a pounding. Unfortunately, the springs, bushes, roll bars and steering joints all showed signs of wear and fatigue so they all had to be replaced.

Lastly, a full emergency light and siren kit, complete with search and work lights, was installed.

If it weren't for local businesses support, small charities such as IOMSARD would not be able to operate. We at O.P.P are proud to support such a charity and wish them every success for the future.

It is unfortunate that a lot of vehicles on Manx roads do not get the love and attention from their owners and only visit a garage when they break down.

Most break downs can be avoided by simple servicing and maintenance. Outdoor Power & Plant not only service heavy and light commercial vehicles but we also have a workshop for motor homes, small vans and cars.

**So, why don't you give Outdoor Power & Plant a call today and save yourself the hassle of a breakdown.**

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# Watching Lola sectioning the hill made the hair on the back of my neck stand up

to read these changes and work the search accordingly is all part of a handler's craft.

I watched her tearing across the hill. She just kept going...and going...and going, until I lost sight of her completely. She had started the 'strike' on the scent from almost 500 meters away from the body's location. Suddenly she was on her way back to me – still running flat out.

I started to run as fast as I could in her direction. Reaching me very quickly, she leaped up and landed her front paws firmly in my stomach. Two very loud barks and she was off again, flying across the hillside.

The find took just over 10 minutes from first strike to me reaching the body. I was starting to feel a bit more confident. The second find was completed in similar style.

The assessors then informed me they were going to set up a much larger area search for us to complete. One of the observers, a police dog handler from Manchester who I had become friendly with over the week, gave me a subtle thumbs-up when the assessors weren't looking, letting me know we were doing okay.

It took us around an hour to



**Matt and Lola, pictured with NSARDA assessors Dave Marsh (left) and Harold Burrows after completing their assessment in the Lake District**

complete the large area search. Watching Lola sectioning the hill made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

I felt very proud of her. We had worked extremely hard to

get to this point and whether we passed or not, she was working well beyond my expectations.

In the end, we passed and were awarded Level 3 Graded

Search Dog Status, which is the highest level a search dog team can reach.

Lola had made history by becoming the very first NSARDA-graded search and rescue dog in Manx history. Not bad for a runt that nobody wanted. And within 24 hours of returning to the Island, we'd received our first call out.

Without the support of my wife, who doesn't complain that I'm permanently out with the dog and who bodied for Lola on New Year's Day when the rest of the world were eating and drinking, without my mentors, Dave Watt and Malcolm Grindrod, for sharing 30 years of search dog experience, without the support of my fellow handlers, Stuart and Jim, who will face the same assessments when their dogs are ready, and without all the fantastic people who have bodied, and continue to body, for Lola, we would not have achieved our grading. Thank you all.